



Kobby Adi, *pending upending*, installation view, Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London, 2020.

Kobby Adi, *pending upending*

By Kashif Sharma Patel

Kobby Adi's *pending upending* can be situated in the realm of abstraction within and through the shape of the world-in-flight. The gallery a place of magic and folklore, where the trickster-figure of the spider Anansi¹ resides under grain and tactile surface. To speak of Adi's work is to enter into multiple conversations that typify the vanishing present. So to write of it becomes a practice beyond mere transcription or transmutation, perhaps as writing should be when understood as a discursive space and semiotic field. In this way we can think of Adi's work as less of a web, rather as a series of encounters and sites of contact. To understand his relationship to sculpture and the art-historical, of which his work is steeped in, we have to look at the fetish-object. Crucially, the fetish-object understood as a vessel of lived existence, something animated, layered with meaning and entropic flows.

for now (2020) is the title of three of the pieces on show. The first encountered are Iroko wood worktops, previously used as school benches, repurposed as folding bench brackets. The African darkwood is considered sacred so the desire to touch is filled with a certain level of apprehension

¹ With origins in West Africa, Anansi is a folkloric character that has traveled on through Caribbean and African American oral traditions.

bringing into focus the question of affectability and control as a function of interaction. Chewing gum marks and school-kid etchings bear the trace of absent figures in the throes of whiling time away under conditions of disciplining. There is an acute sense of historicity here in which the manner of experiencing the passage of time is both delineated and undercut. The wood exists both then and now. Its absent presence is metaphysical in concept, but wholly actual in its relationship to the encounter it animates, much in the same way Anansi figures as a living cultural material affecting the world. So too our second encounter of *for now* (2020), consisting of Firefighter boots tied up with orthopaedic casting tape, coupled with the flame-resistant glass of *NW9* (2020), animates a sense of history through a contemporary resonance with the Grenfell fire, whilst also referencing Adi's childhood. The sediments here build into an intricate set of relations that can only ever be social despite their aesthetic form.

And rather than see the social as a mere absent trace we can look to Cédric Fauq's essay, 'Transactional Objects Full of Contexts in Voided Sites'², wherein he argues that abandoning spaces in a minimalist thrust isolates an object-as-gesture, reformulating how the white gallery space is occupied. The anti-black precondition of that space, as an institutional manifestation of a socio-historical reality, has to thus be undone through a flight, a desertion, an unworlding. This new conceptualism he defines as that which 'helps reformulating systems of oppression while emphasizing the need for the adoption of a radical affective sociality; a conceptualism that gives new meaning to potential flight for liberation and the beautiful crafting of strategies to refuse representational performances of blackness, in intersection with the abolition of labour as we know it. Or, simply put, a conceptualism that command us to take a breath.' Adi's conceptualism as routed in the social is thus this structuring substrate.

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The exhibition's title *pending upending* refers to the Black Panther Party's slogan 'Survival Pending Revolution'. Survival has been redacted, hidden, a secret that lies in a box proliferating through the space. Its hidden nature part of a secrecy oppressed into its form, yet always emergent, at the edge of an opening. Sacredness resides here too, where a messianic millenarian impulse might be found amidst the mystic opacity. But perhaps more aptly we can think of subalterity, that which has been subordinated to the point of illegibility, that evasion of recognition as a practice of movement. Revolution, the upending, is premised on the everyday practice of survival, and its hidden nature a compounding of sociality as prime vector.

Last Cypher (2020) is a construction site hoarding that bisects the space and closes off one entrance. Flame effect light bulbs shine through industrial polycarbonate bulkheads as both invitation and warning. Fugitive life resides here in all its informality and scattered motion. But this is something careful and articulate. Sociality is under duress, obscured; the blurred glass of *NW9* (2020) makes this even more so apparent. We have to think about the space as conduit for something else, where enclosure is disarmed and sanctity disabused, even as careful attentiveness remains transient. The third *for now* (2020) piece is a 16mm film of a toe looped on a digital screen. Its tender warmth is product of what Adi sees as the alchemy of film, its inherent magic that secretes latent image to active reality. We can think here of portals, cutting through

² <http://moussemagazine.it/transactional-objects-full-of-contexts-in-voided-sites-cedric-fauq-2020/>

landscape and perceptible plane, much like the wanderings of Amos Tutuola's fiction. This is fantastical and elegiac. The aesthetic is non-coercively rearranging desire, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would argue³, and this is happening both spatially and in abstraction, where breath is being uttered before or parallel to the institutional space. Breath here is vital and varied. Breath's affectivity is almost pre-linguistic, yet filled with sediments of negotiated meaning.



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If the multiple conversations occurring in the social go some way to structuring the aesthetic form of Kobby Adi's practice, then the accompanying pamphlet, *Excerpts from Radiations* by Anna R. Japaridze, is perhaps the most concrete manifestation of that. Conceived out of a series of correspondence between Adi and Japaridze, the pamphlet is a sequence of poetic musings caught somewhere between the experience of time as a subjection of oneself, and as a part of a larger conversation that probes ambivalence. Japaridze states: 'How many first times are now quietly submerging us, because we are starved of the words by which to address them.' A provocation, an interrogation, an incision. 'That's the wound to which I am trying to attend: that these stories, these life events, didn't proceed to be cut from their stem; that this was – still is – part and parcel with that future that gave that past shape.' There's something here about curiosity and the embrace of the outside which tries to avoid the tautologies of a sealed discourse. Instead, there's an aesthetic sociality at play, where signs, gestures, words, myths are exchanged in transactional moments from which something else erupts. The secret, the occluded, the

³ See Spivak, An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalisation (Harvard, 2012)

oppressed, the striated emergent which works in opposition to prevailing modes of institutionality and dominant modes of management.

In the surround a wider atmosphere urbane and convivial gathers. The pamphlet is published through Adi's small press Martlesham Walk, a nod to his NW London locale. The logo depicts a spider, a visible trace of the Anansi figure that prefigures the gallery space. These small offerings in the rapid flows of the city (one in which Japaridze poses their friend's question, 'when will London be finished?') are iterations of an unfolding textuality indelible to urban social life. This textuality we find distributed in black experimental poetics, from iterations of rap and hip hop through to page poetry of the western tradition. James Goodwin, in his forthcoming book *Fleshed Out For All the Corners Of The Slip* (The 87 Press), has a creative-critical sequence called 'Notes on Aural and Aura'. Specifically thinking through the relations of sound, poetry and music, we are faced with a series of fragments on placelessness, subjectivity and aesthetics. The opening fragment reads:

'Aural and aura, or sound fleshed out are, here, conceptually implied as metaphors of and for non-relationality in black experimental poetics. What it images doesn't reflect back to us the subject-object relations that galvanise [black experimental] poetry's predisposition to forms of institutional life, given in [literary critical, aesthetic] discourse constituting the reproduction of transcendental subjectivity. . .

The black experimental poet, configured as the twofold dialectical-phenomenological object of contemporary poetics produces, in the context of the subject's discursive encounter with the textual/tactual complexes of, borrowing from Fred Moten, the 'black social life of poetry', the hermeneutic suspension and suspicion that structures their critical engagement that forms the aporetic horizon and experiential limit of an individuated comprehension.

Black social life in poetry corresponds to the acute dissolution of the individual subject's spatio-temporal sense of coordination with the external world of physical phenomena, that is to say of the relation through which the transcendental subject's prepossession of ideal or material objects prefigures their coercive hold by perception and intuition.'

What this does is both delineate and discombobulate. A deep attention to the theoretical is undercut by its *in media res* nature forming an open conversation that one can tap into both consciously and impressionistically. Its poetic core, driven by both tersity and density, is at once playful and discursive. But discourse here relates to the social worldings in motion, and this is where we turn back to urban living as a poetic and social venture. Its transactionality a frame for the sounding out that typifies mediating relations. This is the survival thing, and this is why revolution both drops out and is lurking thence. Instead upending, the turning of the world upside down, is something already pending because it is already indeterminate. The social everyday as an indeterminate aesthetic tracing is thus both vessel and practice. The ambivalence, in both Goodwin's and Adi's work, is very much with regards to how the negotiation with institutionality, conceptualism as art-historical form, and reification of the art-object is identified with. My contention is that if desire always exceeds interest at the irruptive moment, with interest being the

visible transactional category where social being appears, then fleeing the scene of the artistic is prerequisite for anything earnest or veracious; in pending the world turns in flight, Adi implores a presencing driven by an aesthetic sociality dripping with prefiguration and alchemical encounter. Upending, a predeterminant already inscribed in the practice at work.

