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Kobby Adi, *All splashing and pouring*, 2024–ongoing, *Cloisters & Instruments* installation view at Swiss Institute, New York, 2024. Courtesy: the artist; CABINET Gallery, London; Swiss Institute, New York. Photo: Daniel Peretz.

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Kobby Adi: The Logic of the Shift

by Stephanie Bailey

It's unclear if Kobby Adi's biography on the Royal Academy of Art's website—which reads, in its entirety, “Kobby Adi lives and works”—is intentional. Perhaps it's a comment on the art world's institutionalized practice of listing an artist's city and year of birth, and a pointed rejection of the practice, which can have the effect of tying possible readings of the work to the artist's identity. Maybe it's a glitch, or an earlier version of an ever-evolving bio, since variations do appear elsewhere (more recently, Adi has begun citing London as his home base). Whatever the case, the ambiguity is classic Adi.

Take Adi's 2024 exhibition at the Swiss Institute in New York, *Cloisters & Instruments*. The work *All splashing and pouring* (2024–ongoing), while presented throughout the institution's premises, is inaccessible in certain parts—depending on your perspective. Labels citing the title, materials, and so on are affixed to walls where water does or could splash, including the restroom and boiler room. The latter is among the sites marked as off-limits for visitors on the show map, which highlights what *All splashing and pouring* really is: an idea extending beyond any material work, disseminated by hitching rides on the memories of those who have seen it, on the words of those who talk about it, or within the images and accounts that document, or merely suggest, its existence. Still, the label is not the artwork. Wherever there's water, *All splashing and pouring* can appear—that's the point.

Adi's elegant conceptualism is defined by its entanglements, with formal interventions threaded into contextual realities that amplify the enmeshment of scales. They can occur through the encounter between artwork-as-riddle and visitor-as-seeker. Consider the material and conceptual grid of the silent 16mm film *Cloisters* (2023–24), for which he printed footage of putrefying apples on degenerating film stocks. Presented in the Swiss Institute's lower-level gallery, the work can also be watched on medical-grade DVDs designed to view diagnostic imaging available to borrow at Tompkins Square Library, and 16mm prints may be taken out on loan from the Reserve Film and Video

Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. A letter from the library confirming the acceptance of Adi's gift is one of two documents affixed to the wall outside the screening room. The other is correspondence from the Swiss Institute confirming the terms of the Reserve Film and Video Collection donation.

What emerges is a chain of transmissions enacted through replication and adaptation, where the logic of the shift holds the artwork together as a decentered, limitless, yet alchemically material entity rather than a static, contained form. As curator KJ Abudu notes, "Adi's investment in film is less about image-making than about the physical processes (the series of bodily actions and/or photo-chemical reactions) that give rise to the resulting image."¹ That process, in which the stages of image making constitute a series of developments from the initial print to its eventual replication, is echoed in the film's content. Tom Denman observes a life cycle: "Attending to [the rotting apple] is a fly, and then a moth. The apple's nourishment of the soil extends to the maggots about to hatch, connecting the airborne with the earthbound, and turning the sphere of the fruit into a mini cosmos."²

Adi's practice is propelled by its insistence on transmutation. Consider *for now* (2020), a work in *pending upending*, Adi's 2021 exhibition at Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, London. *for now* comprised three elements dispersed on either side of *The Last Cypher* (2020), a construction-site barrier coated in black spray paint and lit by a row of flame-toned lights that divided a seating area from an alcove. A pair of firefighters' boots wrapped in orthopedic casting tape and stockinette bandages and a looped 16mm film of an infection-damaged toe within the alcove comprised two components of *for now*, the third being a pair of vandalized, gum-pocked iroko-wood school benches placed on the other side of *The Last Cypher*'s divide. The components of *for now* have since been individually renamed to *no title*. Meaning is an entanglement of ever-shifting relations that unfolds in the gaps between things, after all, and it is in those apertures where new grounds form.

Within these expansive material frames, where linearity collapses, a contextual precision cuts through. In the case of the iroko wood that Adi centered in *for now*, we learn through exhibition materials that the United Kingdom imports this timber, coveted for its durability, but it is considered sacred in West African mythology, and felling the tree without permission is believed to invoke a curse—what Adi has described as “an additional presence in the exhibition.”³ The use of material to conjure an additional presence, to make a spectral absence known, likewise animated Adi’s contribution to the Whitney’s ISP Curatorial Program 2023 exhibition, *Clocking Out: Time Beyond Management*. Describing “Adi’s structural incorporation of palm wine into film (the modernist medium par excellence),” Abudu identifies a specific haunting in *Palm Wine Developer for B/W Motion Picture Film (2023)*, which consists of instructions on how to use palm wine to develop celluloid film, and *Whiskey (2022)*, a 35mm film negative processed with palm wine contained in a matchbox. In the context of modernity, “palm wine is a charged substance in the West African symbolic economy,” Abudu notes. “In alluding to the time of the spirit realm, which as some African philosophers have argued connotes a time ‘outside of time,’ Adi’s simple artistic gestures materialize fugitive possibilities for exiting modernity’s temporal disciplining grip.”⁴

The logic of the shift becomes the creation of exits, not as escape routes but as transgressions against enclosure. Even when there’s an artwork to see, the idea of the work itself exists in the world in its own right as the object’s ever-extending shadow, refusing its containment by crossing distances, temporal and otherwise, and disrupting any division between where the artwork starts and the world, and all of its material histories, begins. One line from an essay by artist and filmmaker Anna R. Japaridze, which Adi commissioned for *pending upending*, illuminates the impetus behind that artful dodge: “Maybe it’s not the finitude of the world that’s troubling, but its openness, its unfinishedness.”⁵ The artist taps into that troubling openness, where reality exceeds any container, by grounding cohesion in the tactics of dispersal and, ultimately, transformation.

Kobby Adi currently lives and works in London.

Stephanie Bailey is a writer and editor from Hong Kong. Formerly senior editor of Ibraaz from 2012 to 2017, a platform for visual culture in and around North Africa and the Middle East, she is curator of conversations at Art Basel Hong Kong, and editor, Asia, for Art Basel, as well as a PhD candidate at Birkbeck College, University of London, where she is exploring the evolution of the postwar international world order through the history of the art fair/biennial exhibitionary complex and its entanglements with the development of international law. She is also global editor at large for Ocula, where she served as editor in chief from 2017 to 2022; a contributing editor to Art Papers; and a regular contributor to Art Review, Art Monthly, e-flux Criticism, and Yishu – Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, among others.