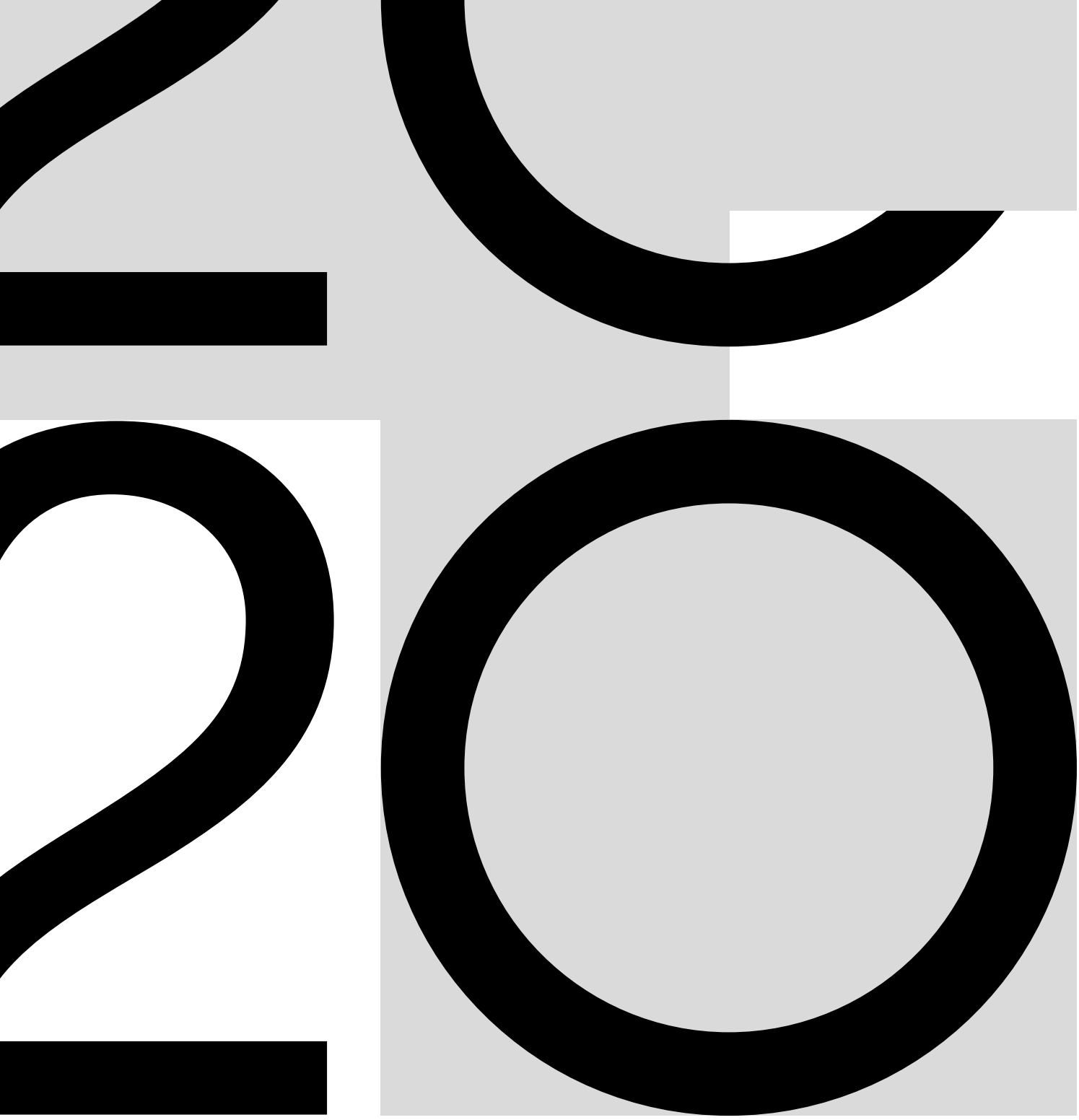

# Agency and Insolence in ‘The Cyclamen and the Cedar’

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

When does an act, gesture or behaviour start counting as ‘insolent’? Existing resources describe that which produces uncomfortable, if not wholly disruptive, punctures within given social arrangements. Insolence can draw itself out from a rude interruption at a dinner table; an unjustifiable scream piercing through a quiet room; a mercurial, disorderly temperament that evades understanding; the conscious breaking of a valuable object; an arrogant refusal to comply in the face of an authority figure. It induces headaches and destabilises, awakening in individuals and forces on its receiving end an impulse to discipline, suppress and police. Despite their liberationist timbre, insolent acts are seldom likened to militant operations. They often do not think so much as they emote. They leave a lasting trail of injury or marks of general discomfort in their wake, but in themselves they are, by strict definition, instantaneous.

Examining British colonial legislature’s definition of insolent acts across Southern Rhodesia and other occupied territories in Africa, historian Allison K. Shutt locates recurring instances of shouting, throwing notes to the ground, expressing anger and causing a scene outside of government offices that resulted in conviction. ‘Native Commissioners [appointed by British settlers] argued that they needed judicial power to prosecute insolent Africans, who, if left unpunished, would undermine state and settler authority,’ she writes.[1] Historian Dixa Ramírez-D’Oleo, revisiting a gruesome chapter of Santo Domingo during Spanish colonial rule when a presumed group of maroons dubbed El Negro Incógnito indiscriminately targeted harvests, cattle, settlements and even enslaved peoples, describes the group as operating from a yearning desire for insolence because of the ‘faceless, potentially everywhere, multiple, and particularly horrifying (from a colonial perspective)’ nature of their acts, which ‘defy any categorisation’.[2]

There is, within the history of contemporary artistic practices, an assemblage of disparate positions which have performed or elicited accusations of insolence, employing various ethical, aesthetic and affective registers to express dismissal, defilement and refusal in the face of interlocking histories of violence and of ongoing anti-capitalist, anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggles. These expressions could, for the most part, be found among minoritarian, migrant and itinerant practices – practices that look towards appropriation, re-enactment, counter-monumentality and other strategies of playful transgression as means through which a dominant symbolic order could at a certain point in time come undone.

Before all else, artist Adham Faramawy’s newly commissioned moving image work ‘The Cyclamen and the Cedar’ stages a violent transposition – a shift, both actual and metaphorical, from the cavernous darkness of a nondescript location somewhere in North Africa, to the luminous front porch of H.S. (Jim) and Helen Ede’s house at Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge, which continues lodging their

collection of twentieth-century art and objects. On the surface, this transposition appears to indicate temporal disjointedness, but one can attentively discern in the artist's intention an attempt to draw out a linear historical narrative borne from coloniality and its present-day manifestations. Where, when and through which incarnation of spectral presence does violence then seep in?

The passage read out among the cave's speleothems (formed by accumulated mineral deposits) remarks that 'it was now that he began to feel conscious of what was perhaps a state of timelessness'. We later understand it was taken from Jim Ede's autobiography, and we are now able to imagine him wandering through a natural landscape around occupied Tangiers in Morocco, where he moved in 1936. The barren swathes he surrounds himself with appear to provide him with a sense of plenitude, an opting out of history's forward march towards an individuated state of dissociative transcendence. Faramawy understands too well how the imperial gaze is able to uproot conquered geographies from their frame of reference, and how it morphs them into blank canvases for its fantasy investments to be projected onto. For these investments to find a footing, a process of abstraction is thus required; the acknowledgment of timelessness isn't so much anodyne poetry as it is a conscious repudiation of historical time. The cavern, Tangiers, all of the North African territories, are thus acquitted from the telos of human progress and relegated to 'zones of non-being', as if through an evanescent stroke of insight.

We are back in Cambridge. Performers Harry Alexander and Moronfoluwa Odimayo are at the Ede estate, their bodies swaying in counterpoint to the painstaking frozenness of each of the manifold rooms. Time and its unrelenting flow shape and constitute the space itself, despite efforts to downturn, atomise, halt its unfolding. I am reminded of Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: 'The archive is a synergetic machine of imperial violence through which this very violence is abstracted and then extracted from the passage of time.'[3] Even so, how else does one account for and experience time on a historical scale if not through the archive and its incessant propensity to fabricate repositories and collections – of art and objects, of artefacts, of witness testimonies and state science fictions? The task afflicting Faramawy, but also Alexander and Odimayo, appears enormous, if not somewhat discouraging: How is the art practitioner expected to hold, concede to and presage the enactment of layers upon layers of violence concealed behind so much beauty?

'The Cyclamen and the Cedar' was, after all, commissioned for a clear institutional purpose, that of the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute's 20/20 project, which 'seeks to challenge colonial and imperial legacies'. To a certain extent, Faramawy engages the exercise at hand with precision. Here, they contemplate the Edes' garden in search of flora indigenous to territories and populations dispossessed

by Western colonial powers – most of the cyclamen species found in said garden are native to the eastern Mediterranean region as well as northeast Somalia, while the Atlas cedar is native to the Rif and Atlas Mountains of Morocco. Elsewhere, they recount an episode from Jim Ede's 220-page manuscript entitled 'Variations on a Week-End Theme', written at the collector's Tangiers residence, in which he boasts about nearly squashing 'two Moors' with his car and getting off scot-free as soon as the British Consulate General is brought up in front of the local authorities. But these rigorous inspections of a life patterned through imperial innocence and an estate – its art and objects collection, its architecture and landscaping, its function within a broader network of state institutions – crammed with traces of the racial-colonial ordering of our world, do not in themselves constitute the crux of Faramawy's artistic intervention.

Performance theorist Diana Taylor, in her towering monograph '¡Presente!: The Politics of Presence', defines 'animatives' as 'embodied, communicative acts that refuse the performative utterance that tries to interpellate or frame them. Animatives, thus, are necessarily relational and responsive. [...] Their efficacy relies on the extent to which they can upend or derail the performative utterance through expressive and affective body-to-body transmission.'[4] Animatives thus dispute the boundaries between formalised performance and everyday behaviour, expanding the scope of what we might consider as carrying performative meaning and significance. Insolent acts are inherently animative; they are in essence, and as mentioned above, small, often unconscious gestures or behaviours that resist codification. Faramawy articulates in clear terms their discomfort with being invited as an artist, but first and foremost as a guest, into the Ede estate. A line from poet and author Bhanu Kapil's work examining the ethics and ambivalences of hospitality is intoned: 'It's exhausting to be a guest / In somebody else's house'.[5] Their tone appears insensitive and crass, even pointing to a divestment of sorts. But if the artist and their performers have answered to the call with a marked presence, how are we to speak of refusal? Perhaps by interpreting Alexander and Odimayo's gestures not as being constitutive of a scripted choreography, but an assemblage of minor gestures aiming to forward a sense of individual, but also collective, agency. By engaging in animatives, by resisting the demand to acknowledge and inhabit the estate as it is meant to be, by keeping eyes locked on one another and ignoring the material presence of artworks and objects around them, a subtle, quiet blueprint of refusal begins to emerge, beginning from the corporeality of both performers and into Faramawy's camera movements and montage techniques. 'And is there not a more insolent act than this?'

## Endnotes

[1] Allison K. Shutt, '"The Natives Are Getting Out of Hand": Legislating Manners, Insolence and Contemptuous Behaviour in Southern Rhodesia, c.1910–1963*', 'Journal of Southern African Studies', vol.33, no.3, 2007, pp.653–72.

[2] Dixa Ramírez-D'Oleo, 'Insolence, Indolence, and the Ayitian Free Black', 'Interventions', vol.24. no.7, 2022, pp.1011–28.

[3] Dixa Ramírez-D'Oleo, 'Insolence, Indolence, and the Ayitian Free Black', 'Interventions', vol.24. no.7, 2022, pp.1011–28.

[4] Diana Taylor, '¡Presente!: The Politics of Presence', Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2020.

[5] Bhanu Kapil, 'How To Wash A Heart', Pavilion Poetry, Liverpool, 2020.

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