

## The Record Goes On

Enunciating “it could be” employs the subjunctive, a grammatical tense often used to express a desire, a demand or a suggestion. It is the “syntax of imagining” as Kevin Quashie writes, conveying a conditional action. It is uncertain because what is articulated may not manifest; uncertain because so many things are. In conversation, Arnold J. Kemp reflects that, “narrative is not the story but the way one is telling the story”. Narrative is a process, imbued with doubt and potential in a becoming that shifts and turns through omission and embellishment. What we choose to underscore is always subjective. Kemp’s exhibition *To Whom Keeps a Record* echoes with the poetics that permeate his expansive practice, arousing contemplation. Playfulness is also a challenge.

Ruminating on thoughts interwoven throughout Kemp’s larger body of work, the exhibition invites visitors to negotiate their own relationships to the intimacy of the artist’s archives. *Possible Bibliography* (2015-2020) is composed of 52 black and white prints of texts that are critical to Kemp’s practice. His hands encounter each book differently, emphasizing a haptic resonance that considers not only what is written in each text, but the materiality of the object and the residues of sentimental meaning that they hold. Comprising fiction, poetry, academic texts, and essays that span a range of artist-thinkers across a broad temporal period, Kemp’s bibliography is a distinctly personal offering. We may enter into a conversation which he has long been having with these writers. With careful insight into his rhizomatic approach to research, the books present an opportunity for visitors to meditate on their own textual references, and a call to cultivate collective bibliographies.

I Would Survive. I Could Survive. I Should Survive. In *Stage* (2023), plywood letters are stacked to construct multiple readings. “Why should anyone care about my survival,” Kemp mentions, a statement that verges on a question. He gestures to the conditions of disposability that bear different weight depending on the circumstances of the person who utters them. This piece is iterative, though the form has changed. It was first shown in Kemp’s exhibition *False Hydras*, the phrases hand written one above the other on a notecard laying on the gallery floor. Now standing at 7-feet tall, the letters evoke a similar quietness to the notecard, but with a commanding presence. The words are directed to no one in particular; perhaps they beckon a turn inwards.

Recite each phrase to oneself, for so often survival is an interplay between yearning and doubt. A wish that may go unfulfilled.

There is a latent dark humor in Kemp's practice, and this emanates in his riff of Gloria Gaynor's disco anthem, "I Will Survive" released in 1978. Composed by modifying the iconic title lyric into the subjunctive tense and sidestepping the reverberant optimism of the original song, *Stage* induces an uneasiness about the likelihood of survival amidst the contentious reality of anti-Blackness as it pierces Black life. At times the ridiculous excess of violence, both physical and psychic, borders on comedic, so prevalent that one teeters in that space between laughing and crying. Is this world real.... Humor is a vital resource as Kemp suggests, "When the work is making me laugh, I feel like that is when it is successful."

What songs enter your mind when you wander? Whose voice brings the solace needed to persist? Kemp creates a sonic atmosphere for visitors to enter into the vinyl recordings from his library in a new sculptural piece, *Music Always Brings Goodness to Us All Unless One Has Some Other Motive for Its Use*. From Lorraine Hansberry and Malcolm X to Ornette Coleman and Alice Coltrane, Kemp mixes musicians, scholars, poets, and revolutionaries, and fosters moments of chance as visitors can approach and change the vinyl being played. Or simply stop the record. The prospect of this intervention is layered in vulnerability, both through Kemp's willingness to share his collection and in the decision visitors may make to reorient the narrative.

Kemp's conceptual musings "Afro-Melancholy and the Blues Imagination", which he speaks of in public lectures, are a rich provocation that textures the exhibition. The difference between melancholy and a general sadness is the pensive quality. It is lingering. To sit alongside sadness, sometimes *inside* of it, akin to the feelings that emerge as Blues music washes over your spirit. Melancholy is a state of being that is not the totality of living, and from which much can be learned, even if never completely understood. It is an awareness that our interior lives will always be in excess of what can be grasped.

"I use a title to help me get to the finish line," Kemp mentions, underlining the poetics of process and the nuances embedded in each of the works included in *To Whom Keeps a Record*. There is great difficulty in attempting to record a life, always

seeming to be incomplete. Arnold J. Kemp's practice attends to the moments and experiences that may be overlooked or forgotten, tracing the depths of the unspoken.