Visiting Artist: Adam Pendleton

Wednesday, October 16, 6:30p
Jacob Sleeper Auditorium
Adam Pendleton is an interdisciplinary artist whose work mines the histories of art and of social movements to create densely layered, conceptual works. Combining painting, silkscreen, collage, video, installation and performance, his broad output is united by a monochrome aesthetic and an engagement with the limits of meaning in both language and images. In his work, historical avant-garde strategies are recontextualized to address the black experience in America. Pendleton’s Black Dada, an ongoing interdisciplinary project in publishing, painting, installation and more, addresses the possibility of a new avant-garde language for African American experience. Pendleton poses urgent yet open-ended questions about the ownership of cultural history and the legacy of Modernism in the present.

Pendleton has been the subject of solo exhibitions at the MIT List Visual Art Center in Cambridge; the Baltimore Museum of Art; the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin; Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans; among many others. He studied at the Artspace Independent Study Program in Peitrasanta, Italy. He is represented by Pace Gallery.
Writing Is to Express
Writings

“A Young Artist and Disrupter Plants His Flag for Black Lives” by Robin Pogrebin, New York Times, 2018

“Adam Pendleton Examines the Multiplicity of Blackness” by Diana Sette, Hyperallergic, 2017

“Black Dada Reader” by Adam Pendleton, 2017

Adam Pendleton in Conversation with Allie Biswas, Brooklyn Rail, 2016

When the unarmed teenager Trayvon Martin was killed in 2012, Florida’s self-defense law known as Stand Your Ground became the subject of much public discussion, though it was ultimately not used in court to defend the shooter, George Zimmerman.

The artist Adam Pendleton nevertheless believed that the law informed the acquittal, which helped prompt the “Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)” he created for the Venice Biennale in 2015.

“Zimmerman got off because he ‘stood his ground,’” Mr. Pendleton said in a recent interview at his Brooklyn studio. “I’m trying to find language that stands ground. I think language that stands ground is ‘Black Lives Matter.”

This week a monumental version of that Black Dada flag was planted on Randalls Island as part of Frieze New York. Selected for the fair’s first six-month-long installation, the flag waves near what was historically known as Negro Point (now Scylla Point), between Harlem and the South Bronx.

“It’s about, what is this island that is used for entertainment events, yet sits between these two communities that are beacons of survival?” said Adrienne Edwards, the curator of live programs at Frieze, who has worked closely with Mr. Pendleton for years. “Some of the most difficult moments in New York City history have happened in these communities.”
Mr. Pendleton, in his studio in April. He initially created his text-based “Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)” for the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, his response to the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Heather Sten for The New York Times

The project is grounded in two of Mr. Pendleton’s favorite subjects — history and language — and comes at a time when the 34-year-old artist is increasingly in the limelight.

He has had no fewer than four solo shows in five years at Pace — the youngest artist the gallery has represented since the 1970s. Museum shows have followed, along with the attention of highly visible private collectors like Michael Ovitz and David Martinez, as well as Aby Rosen and Alberto Mugrabi, who together purchased the work by Mr. Pendelton that is currently on view at Lever House on Park Avenue.

Last fall, Mr. Pendleton achieved a record price for his work at auction: $225,000 for one of his “Black Dada” paintings, nearly four times Christie’s high estimate. Koenig Books published a hardcover version of his “Black Dada Reader” — a 2011 spiral-bound selection of essays originally photocopied and passed among friends — one of The New York Times’s Best Art Books of 2017.

“Language shapes our experience or it gives shape to the things we experience,” Mr. Pendleton said. “It compels me, it pushes me forward.”

Those who know him well say the young artist has an old soul, and that he is committed to investigating and honoring the past. Together with the artists Rashid Johnson, Ellen Gallagher and Julie Mehretu, for example, he is helping to rescue the North Carolina house of the singer and civil rights activist Nina Simone.
“He has several passions and he approaches these passions from many different directions,” said Laura Hoptman, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art who contributed an essay to Mr. Pendleton’s “Black Dada” book. “This is a very contemporary way of looking at the world and a very contemporary way of approaching art.”
In discussing his work, people in the art world often make reference to the wall drawings of Sol LeWitt, the collages of Robert Rauschenberg and the text-heavy works of artists like Glenn Ligon and Christopher Wool.

Indeed, words are central to Mr. Pendleton's practice, which also takes the form of sculpture, film, performance and video. His black-on-black “Black Dada” paintings — which incorporate letters from the titular phrase — reference the artistic and literary movement that arose in reaction to what he has referred to as the “state-sanctioned physical and intellectual brutality” of World War I, as well as LeRoi Jones’s 1964 poem, “Black Dada Nihilismus.”

While Mr. Pendleton may qualify as a millennial, he does his reading in hard copy, rising around 5:30 a.m. in his apartment in the Fort Greene section of Brooklyn to immerse himself in books or essays before breakfast.

He typically gravitates toward cultural theorists, poets and critics — Stuart Hall’s posthumous memoir, “Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands,” about growing up in Jamaica in the 1930s; Fred Moten’s “In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition,” on the connections between jazz, sexual identity and radical black politics; Judith Butler's “Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,” a look at the vulnerability and aggression that followed Sept. 11.
“I’m pretty sure he came into this world as a 50-year-old man,” Ms. Edwards said. “He’s a sage.”

The shelves in Mr. Pendleton’s Richmond, Va., childhood home included the poets Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. His mother, a retired elementary schoolteacher, wanted to be a writer (his father, a contractor, is also a musician). Young Adam started writing poetry and plays at an early age.

“My mom said, ‘When you buy a book you’re not really spending money,’” he said. “I would never buy 100 shirts a year, but I know I buy 100 books a year.”

Painting for hours a day in his basement as a teenager, Mr. Pendleton finished high school two years early, studied art in northern Italy and then moved to New York.

He came out to his mother as gay on New Year’s Eve 1999, just before the new millennium. “I think I wanted it to be something I would remember,” he said. (He married Karsten Ch’ien, co-founder of the Yumami Food Company, two years ago.)

“My parents did this really generous thing,” Mr. Pendleton, said of growing up with his older brother and younger sister. “They let us be who we are.”

Reviewing the artist’s first solo show, “Being Here,” at Wallspace in 2004, Roberta Smith wrote in The New York Times that Mr. Pendleton’s “text-based works bring a no-frills simplicity to interactive art.”

He went on to show his work at Yvon Lambert’s gallery, but it was his 2007 Performa performance piece, “Revival,” in which he combined reading with a gospel choir, that put Mr. Pendleton on the map. “A commanding performer, he delivered a soliloquy, part sermon, part aria,” wrote Holland Cotter in The Times, “of spliced-together quotations about family, marriage, AIDS and racism.”

Thinking back on the project now, Mr. Pendleton said, he is somewhat incredulous, describing himself as “maybe gracefully naïve.”

“A lot can go wrong when 200 people are in a room watching you,” he said. “No one had responded to anything I put out in the world that way before.”

Things took off from there. Ms. Hoptman asked Mr. Pendleton to participate in the New Museum’s first triennial in 2009.
Eventually, Pace got interested (Mr. Pendleton is also represented by Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich, Galerie Max Hetzler in Berlin, and Galeria Pedro Cera in Portugal). “He is assembling an intuitive poetry out of language, which roots itself in his experience — the African-American experience,” said Marc Glimcher, Pace’s president. “The result is what art should be.”

At first, Mr. Pendleton felt out of place at such an established gallery. But after digging into the history of its artists, from Agnes Martin to Robert Ryman, “I realized that in a strange way it did make sense,” he said, “because I disrupted that space — a young African-American artist showing alongside these giants.”

While the artist’s bright eyes and boyish cheeks convey a callowness, he also has a deliberative way of working that suggests he won’t be pushed into overproducing (he makes about 12 works a year).

With his work now hanging in institutions like MoMA and the Tate, Mr. Pendleton said the current effort by museums to better incorporate black artists has only just begun. “I hope they realize how deep they have to go, how long it will take,” he said.
“It can’t just be one show,” he added, citing as an example the survey of little-known sculpture by the American artist Jack Whitten, which opened April 22 at the Baltimore Museum of Art and comes to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in September. “It has to be many — many shows, many essays, many conversations. There’s a lot of work to be done.”

Sara Friedlander, the head of Christie’s Post-War & Contemporary Art department in New York, said that Mr. Pendelton’s auction strength is reflecting a transition in art buyers. “We’re in a moment right now where people are not just about what they’re looking at on their walls, but the intention and the meaning behind it,” she said. Mr. Pendleton, she added, “is making art that is about a specific moment in history that we all have to pay attention to.”

Despite the commercial pressures, the artist insists he has stayed focused on the work. “The studio is the first place I want to be and the last place I want to leave,” he said.

Still fresh in his memory are the days when he first moved to New York City, found himself “overwhelmed” and moved upstate to Germantown for five years — in part because it was more affordable. When recalling how a landlord let him live rent-free for the first six months, Mr. Pendleton’s eyes fill with tears.

However difficult the road has been at times, Mr. Pendleton said his upbringing kept him feeling rooted and supported. “I knew I could go home — it allows you to take risks,” he said. “Even now I think to myself: at least I can go home.”

Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)
Through Nov. 1 on Randalls Island

Adam Pendleton: what a day was this
Through Aug. 28 at the Lever House Art Collection, Manhattan; leverhouseartcollection.com.

A version of this article appears in print on May 4, 2018, on Page C13 of the New York edition with the headline: Planting a Flag for Black Lives
ART

Adam Pendleton Examines the Multiplicity of Blackness

The artist’s largest solo exhibition to date explores blackness as a color, an idea, an identity, a method, and a political movement.

Diana Sette  May 2, 2017

CLEVELAND — Adam Pendleton’s *Becoming Imperceptible* at Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) Cleveland offers a refreshing juxtaposition of often-segregated art histories and their cultural counterparts, presenting a multiplicity of perspectives that provide insights into our interconnectedness and future possibilities. Pendleton describes his work as Black Dada, a title he borrowed from the poem “Black Dada Nihilismus” by Amiri Baraka (who was known as LeRoi Jones at the time of its publication). In his Black Dada Manifesto, Pendleton describes the movement as “a way to talk about the future while talking about the past.” Particularly in *Becoming Imperceptible*, Pendleton’s work examines what blackness is, how it relates to our humanity, and how our understanding of a history of blackness impacts our understanding of the present and, in turn, our collective capacity for change.

*Becoming Imperceptible* was organized by the Contemporary Art Center New Orleans and traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver before coming to Cleveland. The artist’s fragmented displays recontextualize European, African, and American aesthetic and cultural movements, from Minimalism and Dada to
Black Lives Matter, specifically looking at blackness as a material to be reshaped and explored, a multiplicity that is simultaneously a color, an idea, an identity, a method, and a political movement.

Pendleton’s fragmentation of black images reflects blackness as incomplete, in motion, and the artist works to disrupt space that presents a logic of identity related to blackness. For example, the Black Dada series of silkscreens on canvas appropriate and fragment Sol LeWitt’s “Incomplete Open Cubes” onto segmented, striped black canvases and evoke “black” through the isolated letters “B,” “A,” and “K.” The sheen of the deep, dark black reflects light in a way that makes the letters and color gradients barely discernable, depending upon your viewing perspective.

The multiplicity of blackness as both color and concept is most strongly presented by the contrast between the three Black Dada works hanging on a stark white wall, and the lone Black Dada painting hanging elsewhere, with “Black Lives Matter #3 (wall work)” (2015) in the background. These contrasting backgrounds present wildly different experiences of blackness, with one sticking out dramatically and the other camouflaged nearly to the point of invisibility, making the viewer reconsider how they understand blackness in context. The words “Black Lives Matter” as a background slow down potential reactions to the text, forcing a reconsideration of its meaning in relation to the other images and language interacting with it.

This multiplicity in representation is reified in “My Education: A Portrait of David Hilliard” (2011–14), in which the former Black Panther leader’s straightforward narrative becomes a layered and complex history through a three-channel video presenting simultaneous perspectives. “Untitled (1958)” (2016) is a détournement of the representation of the Civil Rights movement. In the center walks Martin Luther King Jr. accompanied by two other Civil Rights leaders, but the iconic photograph is broken down into nine parts, with illegible words written over the image. The fragmented work suggests that the narrative is incomplete, and the piece’s reflective Mylar background invites self-recognition, self-reflection, and a multiplicity of perspectives.
Pendleton drew the show’s name defines “becoming imperceptible” as “the event for which there is no immediate representation.” Pendleton chooses to break down and fragment representations of blackness, because for him, becoming imperceptible where there is no immediate representation creates the potential for arriving at a totally new understanding. What might be possible if we consider blackness in a new way?

The black and white single-channel film *Just Back From Los Angeles: A Portrait of Yvonne Rainer* is the most powerful piece in the show. It documents an exchange, both unscripted and scripted, between Rainer and Pendleton during a meeting at the Ridgeway Diner in NYC’s Chelsea neighborhood. One of the most moving parts of the film is when Rainer reads a text Pendleton prepared for her that mixes words from Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, antiwar poet Ron Silliman, and Rainer’s own published works. Laid over fragmented images of Pendleton and Rainer sitting in the classic ’50s diner and Rainer’s 1966 minimalist dance “Trio A” is the Silver Harps’s gospel song “I Am Saved” and Rainer & Pendleton’s voices. The film travels through multiple periods of time and encourages deep contemplation of the past, present, and potential future of civil rights in the US. Listening to Rainer’s steady, slow reading, particularly of Taylor’s description of police killings of John Crawford, Michael Brown, Tanesha Anderson, and Tamir Rice, while watching her, a white woman, dancing in black, arms behind her back, rolling on the floor — it creates an alienated and moving experience of the brutality and trauma being plainly described. Rainer concludes by reading her own words: “I remember the breathlessness of the lifting section ... I remember ... you grinning at the pleasure we had.” Viewing the film in Cleveland, the site of several of the police killings described, amplifies the work’s urgency and potency, creating a simultaneously overwhelming and transcendental experience.
narratives of segregated histories and reveals them in connection with one another. The tenderness of Pendleton and Rainer engaging in an exercise called “arm drop” — where they hold each other’s arms, drop them, and grab them again in different positions — visually reinforces the interconnectedness, tenderness, and generosity required to move forward and create something new. The film ends powerfully and with reverence as the gospel song drops out and Rainer continues moving deliberately, in silence.

In Deleuze and Guattari’s words, “the Becoming-Imperceptible is an eruption of desire for the future which reshapes the present ... flooding the present by possible futures.” James Baldwin reminds us that “if [history] were in the past, it would not matter ... History is the present.” Pendleton’s works present the profound ambiguity of the present by creating revised histories, encouraging us to devise new vocabularies that speak to and question the present with an understanding of interconnectedness and an encouragement for inquiry.

Adam Pendleton: Becoming Imperceptible continues at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (11400 Euclid Avenue) through May 14.
Black Dada: what can black dada do for me do for me black dada, a reader
Black Dada Reader

Adam Pendleton

Koenig Books, London
what can black dada do for my institution
do for my institution black dada,
some thoughts
Jenny Schlenzka

What is Black Dada?


I met Black Dada’s initiator, Adam Pendleton, in 2008, when I invited him to present at a workshop about performance art at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the nine years since, we have engaged in many long conversations, worked on several smaller projects, and developed a meaningful friendship. Nevertheless, I still find it hard to define (in a few sentences) what Black Dada actually is and does.

What can Black Dada do for me?

The first edition of the Black Dada Reader, whose genesis I have been fortunate to witness from up close, was conceived in lieu of a proposal for a yearlong residency at MoMA in 2011. The idea was to develop a platform at the museum for different conversations around race, gender, and sexuality that shift the institutional language away from the concepts of “black,” “female,” or “gay”—subjects that tend to perpetuate essentialism by quota—and toward a conceptual framework that allows identity to emerge as a continuous process. Instead of creating an on-paper definition of what Black Dada is and does, the Reader already performs Black Dada’s very propositions and strategies: its penchant for mixing seemingly incommensurable subjects, experimentation with language, inclusiveness, as well as a socially and politically invested trajectory. By assembling essays and reference materials from vastly different historical periods, backgrounds, and genres, the Reader creates unexpected juxtapositions out of which new possibilities arise. It is hard to imagine another book that combines a poem by Gertrude Stein with an interview about Jean-Luc Godard, and a text-based drawing by William Pope.L. Yet these have much to say to each other. Like its eponymous European predecessor, Black Dada presents itself as an open-ended signifier. Inherently multidisciplinary and diverse, it incorporates all realms of culture—combining radical positions in visual art, music, design, theory, dance, and literature—as it aims to create new realities.

What can Black Dada do for my language?
Wittgenstein’s famous dictum “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” implies that in order to create new realities, we need to create new ways of speaking— and it is probably safe to say that, at its core, Black Dada’s initial proposition is a linguistic one. It is no coincidence that two of Black Dada’s foundational texts were written by the poets Hugo Ball and LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka); both worked to recover, subvert, and reinvent languages that broke free from the colonized languages of daily life. Whereas the Dada Manifesto (1916) aimed to destroy any form of established bourgeois meaning in World War I Europe, “Black Dada Nihilismus” (1964) was an attack on the moralist and hypocritical language of 1960s white America.

In this spirit, additional poets—included under the section “LANGUAGE” in the Black Dada Reader—have made further efforts to generate new or alternative languages. While Ron Silliman investigates the possibilities of a new kind of sentence within the ordinary syntactical structure of a prose poem, Joan Retallack advocates a radical re-examination of silence in order to pave the way to a less determined and more polymorphous future. In her moving account of teaching black literature to young black students, June Jordan tells of how a rigorous linguistic study of the rules of colloquial black English turned students’ feelings of shame and inferiority into ones of solidarity and empowerment.

What can Black Dada do for my institution?

For a start, it is useful to remember that art, like any other discursive formation such as economics or physics, is already an institution. The art world is a collectively accepted system of rules that enables us to establish institutional facts. The art institution is the place where these rules, procedures, and practices are negotiated and enacted. To give a simple example: the acquisition (or not) of an artwork into a museum’s collection establishes the fact that a particular work is considered art, worthy of preservation (or not).

Earlier accounts of the interaction between art and its institutions—including those associated with the movement known as Institutional Critique—have too often ignored the role of language in governing this interaction. This ignorance prevents critics from getting to the root of the issue. As the philosopher John Searle has indicated, “if you presuppose language, you have already presupposed institutions.” By contrast, he argues that “instead of presupposing language and analyzing institutions, we have to analyze the role of language in the constitution of institutions.”

Though we often think of museums as containers for pictures, a museum is also an enormous language-producing machine whose aim is to continuously establish stability. Consider the contemporary museum’s immense investment in didactic materials: note how every object label, wall text, press announcement, and catalogue essay (this one included) collaborates to smooth, with authority, any rough edges of the art object. Institutional titles, unified styles, and graphic identities all work toward a similar end. Black Dada’s strategy is, first, to study these stabilizing functions of institutional language and then to take the further step of introducing elements of destabilization. What would happen—and this is one of Black Dada’s unrealized proposals—if a museum were to hand over its entire linguistic output to a group of poets? What if their words were laid out by experimental graphic designers free of any stylistic restrictions? Can we conceive of an institutional language that is less didactic and more open to different interpretations? Is it possible to imagine museum visitors producing meaning rather than consuming it?

Through institutional language, museums formulate classifications and interpretations. By means of exhibitions and catalogues, they establish taxonomies that group works of art by obvious metrics: because they are from one individual artist or artistic movement, because they share a medium, were made in the same historical period, or are from a similar geographic region, etc. Black Dada’s strategy, in comparison, is diagnostically opposed. Instead of representing an idea or establishing classifications, the Black Dada Reader produces new thoughts by juxtaposing authors, texts, artists, and concepts whose proximity to one another is not immediately obvious. Instead of focusing solely on the Black Panthers’ role in the Civil Rights Movement, say, Black Dada juxtaposes a text by Stokely Carmichael with the Dada Manifesto, a text written on the other side of the Atlantic, fifty years before the founding of the Black Panther Party. Reading the two texts back-to-back recovers Dada’s tactical nonsense as a precursor weapon against a society that naturalizes racial identity in the service of oppression and exploitation. Dada’s assault on received meaning both anticipates and rehearses the Panthers’ own refusal of the narrative of black subjugation and inferiority.

What can Black Dada do for history?

When asked about what Black Dada is, Pendleton often answers with a quote from his manifesto, “Black Dada is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past; it is our present moment.” Beyond displaying Pendleton’s intrinsic interest in conversations, this statement describes a vision of history that doesn’t simply progress from past to present to future in a linear fashion. In this confluence of different periods of time, Black Dada submits a proposition that the art institution should take seriously. After all, such institutions not only produce language and taxonomies, they also formulate a concept of time, and, by extension, history.

2. Ibid.
3. See Black Dada, 333.
Born of the same historical moment as modern art history (nineteenth-century Europe), linear chronology is lodged deep in the temporal DNA of the public art museum. Art history and art museums alike imagine time as a progression of stylistic periods. By comparison, non-collecting contemporary art institutions founded in the last forty years often focus solely on the present moment and forgo any historical contextualization whatsoever. These succumb to what Claire Bishop has called “presentism”: the condition of taking our current moment as the only horizon and destination of our thinking.

For Black Dada, both conceptions of history are unsatisfactory. In the first case, chronological time presents history as a fixed causal sequence that could not have taken place otherwise. It makes our current condition appear as the only one possible and denies any more pluralistic, anachronistic, or speculative approach that might begin by asking, “What could have happened if . . . ?” While the second, presentist case denies any importance to the past and offers little or no perspective on a possible future. For Black Dada, the inclusion of the past and the future, in whatever combination, is indispensable if we are to grasp fully the social and political urgency of our current moment.

An illuminating example of what a nonlinear, nonpresentist approach might look like was a discursive event, Symposium, organized by the aforementioned poet and scholar Joan Retallack, at the invitation of Pendleton as part of his MoMA residency in 2014. The event was modeled on a queering of Plato’s Symposium. Retallack invited a select cadre of artists, poets, and philosophers (among them poet Anne Carson, Palestinian architect Sandi Hilal, and cultural critic Fred Moten) to present performative lectures that began with a speculative “Suppose . . . .” Following the talks, the audience engaged in collaborative thought experiments and language games.

So, what is Black Dada?

Symposium is Plato’s dialogic exploration of eros, which brings me to Black Dada’s most essential significance for the museum: love. Not in the common sense, as in the love between two people or within the family, but love which spreads across the entire social field and includes all that has already been and all that is yet to come. Building on Michael Hardt’s concept of political love, Pendleton has lately been considering love as a force that drives not only his aesthetic practice but also the larger trajectory of Black Dada. The mystery of love, according to Hardt, is its twofold nature: on the one hand, it is a revolutionary power, altering reality and tearing down inherited structures; on the other hand, it creates strong bonds and enduring institutions. “[L]ove appears simultaneously as an anti-institutional and institutional process, both of which are, in some sense, unlivable.” And it is precisely this movement back and forth between these two “impossible” places that clears the space for a new kind of art institution, one that would continuously tear down its own established structures while simultaneously creating new ones. It would be a place where we actively engage with the past as well as project the future, and thus illuminate our current space in time.

Words are essential in Adam Pendleton’s art. The artist’s engagement with experimental prose and poetry over the past ten years, along with his cross-referencing of visual and social histories, has made space for new types of language within conceptual art. Pendleton’s largest U.S. museum show to date, *Adam Pendleton: Becoming Imperceptible*, opened at Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans in April, before traveling to the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver, where it is on view through September 25.

**ALLIE BISWAS**: You made an instrumental move in getting your career off the ground by taking your art to galleries and making them look at it. There’s a story that your work was included in a show in New York at Gallery Onetwentyeight, the director of which assisted Sol LeWitt, and that’s how LeWitt saw your work.

**ADAM PENDLETON**: Yes, that’s true. Those earlier works (almost) always incorporated language, for one. Otherwise, there was a system to how the thing was composed. So I was convinced that, even though visually they looked like abstract painting, they were very much conceptual. That was actually the most gratifying thing, of course, when LeWitt came into the gallery and commented on my work. Whatever my view on this paternalistic language and its historical accuracy, he’s been called the father of conceptual art, so when he said, “Oh, I like this!” I was this young kid who was totally sure of this already and could turn around and say to anyone who would listen, “See, it is conceptual!” [Laughter] But who knew why he was drawn to the piece. I never had the opportunity to talk with him about it, but we did trade at the time.

Some of the earlier works I appreciate more than others, like any artist. But for me, it was all happening in public. So I sometimes think that I basically went to art school for one reason—like any artist. But for me, it was all happening in public. I did my first solo show in New York at Yvon Lambert in 2005, and I did a project at Wallspace in 2004 just before that. I was twenty.

**RAIL**: It sounds a bit absurd, doesn’t it?

**PENDLETON**: Now it does. [Laughter]

**RAIL**: What was happening to your work and your process during this time?

**PENDLETON**: The work changed, and—I guess because of my age—I was very open to that. I think a lot of what art students are trying to do is related to trying to find something—the thing that they feel “works.” You look around, and it does seem like artists who have had any kind of trajectory have been able to maintain a kind of logical progression of their work. So I think a lot of people are trying to find that first thing that works for them. But actually, the thing that works is learning how to manage the chaos of making art. That’s what really works.

**RAIL**: Your performance from 2007 [The Revival] caught the attention of a lot of people. Would you agree that this work took your career in a different direction?

**PENDLETON**: That was when my own thinking about my work changed dramatically, yes. You have all of these ideas, and then you realize that what you make can’t be a half-step toward those ideas. You actually have to manifest it. So I had this idea of taking a Southern-style religious revival, and turning it on its head, and then fusing it with experimental language. It was really that simple. I think that at the time, I had the idea to deconstruct, reconfigure, and reimagine an existing form and ask: what else could this be? What happens if you remove

the religious aspect, but you leave the gospel music, the musical component? What happens if you take out the religious language and put in language that’s related to queer activism or contemporary poetics? It was about creating a capacious space, breaking down one form and creating something else.

**RAIL**: Was The Revival the first time that you had made a performance?

**PENDLETON**: On that scale, for sure, but I had been collaging texts and making performances before that.

**RAIL**: When did language start to be laid into your photographic painting works?

**PENDLETON**: Well, language was always an important part of my life. I used to write poetry—don’t all teenagers write poetry? [Laughter.] It’s funny that, while things have changed a lot, they haven’t changed much at all, and I think a lot of this was just the environment that I grew up in. My mom had Adrienne Rich’s books in the house and June Jordan and Andre Lorde, so I was reading their work when I was very young. My dad was a musician—not professionally, but he played music when he was at home. In many ways I think that we are a product of our environment, although I am not inclined toward reading people’s biographies to make sense of who they are and what they do. My brother and my sister were in the same house and they’re not artists. But of course you see these things going on, and they piqued my interest. But there was also a political drive from a very early age. I always thought that art was something that could effect change, and I think that in a strange way that was the real drive. What could I do that would actually change things around me, or change how we imagine the world and our built environment? Art was this thing that could shift attention.

**RAIL**: Maybe now is a good time to talk about Black Dada, which could be read as connecting language to a political drive.

**PENDLETON**: The paintings that I showed in my first solo show in New York were text paintings, and they appropriated the writing of people like Toni Morrison, Rich, Jordan, and Lorde. They basically attempted to represent the cadence of someone speaking the words that were visually present. They were two-color silkscreens, and I think quite special in a way. Linguistically, they referenced one poetic tradition, but in terms of layout and so on they had a concrete poetry aspect, though less austere somehow than that might sound. They were quite erotic and loving. Later I became introduced to writers like Joan Retallack, Ron Silliman, Leslie Scalapino, and Charles Bernstein.

**RAIL**: What impact did those writers have on you?

**PENDLETON**: Reading their work caused a big shift in my own work. It wasn’t a visual thing. It had more to do with theoretical positions around language, going from one school of thought—I guess you could call it a lyrical school, which the poets I was reading had a very political foundation with regards to content—to a very different school, which was more aligned with how conceptual artists thought about language: language as material. So there was this productive overlap between language, conceptual art, lyrical poetry, and activism—whether formal or content-based or both. I didn’t feel it necessary so much to take sides. I wasn’t a poet as such, and think I took from the different genres or schools what felt useful at that time. The Revival was the first time those ideas were presented publicly and cohesively, and it just happened to be a performance. Black Dada, in one sense,
represents the things that I started to do with language in a visual space following The Revival.

RAIL: So this political drive was the foundation for how you were approaching everything that you were making. But what was the actual intention?

PENDLETON: Black Dada is an idea. When pressed, I often say it’s a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It surfaced in a conversational space, when I was just talking to friends. I had Amiri Baraka’s book The Dead Lecturer, which contains the poem “Black Dada Nihilisms.” I found the language striking: “Black Dada.” Just that. The “Black” and the “Dada.” “Black” as a kind of open-ended signifier, anti-representational rather than representational. And then “Dada”—sort of nonsense. A sound, but also referencing a moment in art. So this language became a productive means to think about how the art object can function, and does function, in the world. What can art do? I think all artists should be asking themselves this question. Not “what is it?” It’s whatever you want it to be, but what can it do? What do you, as an artist, want it to do? Black Dada also became a way to create a conversation and to insert my words into conversations about appropriation that I was observing at that particular time, in about 2008. I don’t know if you remember how everyone was talking about appropriation around that time, as though it was something new, and of course, wasn’t. So it was a way to shift perspectives, but it also, again, created space for myself as an artist. I still reside there as an artist, but I keep pushing it and trying to change the shape of it, and of the space(s) it creates.

RAIL: And you put together a Black Dada book. How did that develop?

PENDLETON: I created a reader, yes. That began as a conversation with Jenny Schlenzka, who is a curator at MoMA PS1, about this idea of Black Dada in relationship to institutions, and how it could change institutional dynamics. The reader is essentially organized into three different sections: “Foundations”—so, foundational ideas to Black Dada, which are represented in text by thinkers from W.E.B. Du Bois to Gilles Deleuze to Stokely Carmichael—and then it shifts into “Language,” which includes a range of writers whose works I’ve been drawn to such as Harriette Mullen, Retallack, Jordan, and others. The third section is “Artists’ Positions,” which collects texts by or about artists whom I relate to Black Dada, including Ad Reinhardt, Joan Jonas, and Stan Douglas, who is represented by his screenplay for Inconscientable Amsterdam. It’s going to come out next year for a show I’m doing in Berlin. The original version was spiral-bound, really an old-school reader. The version that is being published will include the content of the original reader along with essays by curators and critics who have engaged deeply with Black Dada including Adrienne Edwards, Laura Hoptman, Tom McDonough, and Susan Thompson.

RAIL: I’m currently working on an anthology of black art, which compiles texts that were written by and about artists in the 1960s and ‘70s. At present there isn’t any publication like it that people can refer to. You wonder, why does this sort of book not already exist?

PENDLETON: It’s interesting that you say that, because around that time, in 2007, I started to think that a lot of gestures that I had made were actually retroactive. I felt that I was creating something that should have existed ten, twenty, forty years ago. It was like I was inserting things into the art-historical canon. For example, with the Black Dada paintings—which relate formally to modernist painting and the monochrome—I was infusing that space with very different language, quite literally, and also sort of messing it up. Messing it up slightly, but a lot at the same time, so it’s also a contradiction, this duality, how a little bit is a lot. So, again, maybe these paintings were made in 1914. It’s illogical. What did LaWitt say: “Illogical judgments lead to new experiences.”

RAIL: Tell me about your residency at MoMA.

PENDLETON: The initial aspect of it is over, yet the broader project continues. It was an incredible opportunity to interact with the collection, but also with the institution, in a more intimate fashion. It was really just the institution saying, “Let’s see what happens.”

RAIL: So what did happen? And how does the context of a residency affect your way of working?

PENDLETON: The one problem I have with residencies is that I don’t really like working in places outside of my own spaces. I like to be around my books, my things. I can’t really pack up the studio and go to Beiruti. So I thought about my work in relationship to the institution in an antagonistic way. I also thought about what kind of discursive or formal gesture I could make that could disrupt the ebb and flow of how this very large entity functions. I began a conversation with Joan Retallack—who is an essayist and poet, and who used to teach at Bard College—saying, “What if we did something at this place, at the Museum of Modern Art? What could we do?” At the time I was reading a short text that was published for Documenta 13 by Michael Hardt titled The Procedures of Love, and so I was initially going to do something around that text, whether that be a public conversation with Hardt, or something else. In the text, and this is a real summary, he talks about the political potential of embracing difference. In essence, potential resides in the differences between us, not in the similarities. I started talking to Joan about this and she went back to this idea of love and eros, and to Plato, to the Symposium. She conceived this event called the Supposium and the basic premise was that she invited different people—myself, along with poet Anne Carson, Sandi Hilal of Decolonizing Architecture, film theorist Peter Krapp, and literary theorist/ poet Fred Moten—to give talks that began with the word “suppose.” So “Suppose…” That was the conceptual conceit, or the point of departure: suppose.

RAIL: How was the event executed?

PENDLETON: We delivered the talks in MoMA’s Founders Room to about 100 participants. Each person was asked to take notes during the talks of phrases or words that captured their attention, and then these notecards were compiled and redistributed. We developed a kind of group text from these fragments. As I say this to you now I realize that in a strange way the Supposium did somehow articulate what Hardt was talking about. Joan described it as a procedural thought experiment. For me, it became this question about how to have productive dialogues. How can we have productive public conversations and exchanges? How do we repurpose this idea of “I’m talking and you listen”? How does that become more about call and response? That was also a key aspect of The Revival: call and response and community through difference, something that has often been a key to black music as well.

RAIL: During Supposium you talked about Black Lives Matter. You had previously used the slogan in your installation in the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2015, but prior to this you had shown paintings in London, earlier on in the same year, that incorporated these words.

PENDLETON: Yes, my show in London was the first time that I exhibited work using that language. But the subject matter came up during Supposium, because that was shortly after George Zimmerman was found not guilty for murdering Trayvon Martin. I was asking the question, “What language stands its ground?” “Stand Your Ground” was the law that created the legal gray area where Zimmerman got off. He was “standing his ground.” I thought: we need language that stands its ground.

RAIL: So you were reacting in real time, as it were. It’s not as though two years went by after these incidents took place, and then you decided to respond through your work.

PENDLETON: I couldn’t help but respond to the absurdity of that situation. It was the accumulation with the ongoing task I’ve set for myself of figuring out what Black Dada is. It is a kind of “black space” one could say. It is also a social space—it creates a social space. I think it gave me the room to respond to Black Lives Matter, even just on the level of the language. They are both very clear short statements.

RAIL: And you were looking at these two statements in relation to each other.

PENDLETON: Beyond anything else, I wanted to look at them in relation to each other—first as an artist, but then as a citizen. And in that context, as a citizen, there was another set of concerns. Jenny and I joined the protest in New York after the Zimmerman verdict. They had to close down Times Square for a short period of time. People were singing “Ellis’ Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock: “We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.” Just thinking about the role of voice in general, and how Occupy Wall Street was a collective voice, but there was no individual voice that rose above all others. During the protests against the Zimmerman verdict, I was looking for a voice. There were different utterances, but you could tell that no one really knew how to speak, which fascinated me for many different reasons. Was that an evolution? Something new and important? Or was it somehow a weakness? So it was almost as though, a premise was that she invited different people—myself, along with poet Anne Carson, Sandi Hilal of Decolonizing Architecture, film theorist Peter Krapp, and literary theorist/ poet Fred Moten—to give talks that began with the word “suppose.” So “Suppose…” That was the conceptual conceit, or the point of departure: suppose.

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Is Black Dada shorthand for “This is Adama?”

Regardless, people understand that you’re not coming to it in this very straightforward way—

—In 2008 I was invited by curator Krist Gruijthuijsen to be a part of a show he curated within Manifesta 7 called it’s a matter of fact and I ended up writing a Black Dada manifesto. Basically it was a system for collecting sentences. So the first line of my text is the title of the manifesto itself: it’s a matter of fact, and then it collects. So it goes from one, two, four, right, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, et cetera, accumulating a repeating series of sentences that are also attracting new language to them as it evolves. In effect it is the theoretical underpinning of the Black Dada project, it deliberately aligns aesthetic/ political distinctions, creating a chronology-based affinity between conceptual art and political actions in the 60s, for example, which had this conceptual and performative intelligence. What always fascinated me was that shortly after I wrote that, I read it publicly in a few places. But then the graphic designer/artist Will Holder also started reading the text around the world in quite different places, and I love this idea of Holder as my doppelgänger or something. You know, going around as the ambassador of Black Dada. It’s so simple—the “Black” and the “Dada.”

But you’re right, there is nothing straightforward about it.

By taking the hashtag Black Lives Matter and inserting it into the work, and being in a position where you can present it widely, do you think that you are one of the only artists to have really gone public with it? Do you think this has given you a kind of “credibility” in the minds of certain other people, in the sense that they are presented with an artist who feels very strongly about this current moment in time and he has acted upon it? Given the expression’s widespread usage, obviously through social media in particular, its popularity could perhaps even be viewed as “fashionable.” That sounds inappropriate, but I think you’ll understand what I’m getting at.

You’re the second person to use the word “fashionable.” The thing is that there are stakes involved in everything that we do. This is paraphrasing the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis: my intention as an artist is not to use clichés and methods of protest in the sense of saying, “This is wrong” and “That is right.” It is, however, to draw attention to things at times, in different ways through different registers. So I wanted to bring it out of the space of actual fashion, where things are short. Occupy Wall Street, in a strange way, is like the past already, even though it’s not, and even though it impacts everyone’s life. The same thing with Black Lives Matter—you have it in the media and everyone’s talking about it. In 2013 it came about and now, in the mainstream media, it’s like, “Oh would they stop carrying on” or “Okay, we get it” or “Let’s go on to other things.”

LeWitt’s incomplete open cubes: Xeroxing it, cropping the Xerox, scanning it, enlarging it, and then laying this text over top of it. I take an object and do something to it, and then do something else to it. I would say everything is some sort of collage and has always been. This is true even in the earlier works that didn’t necessarily look like a collage, because what I was doing was taking someone else’s language and then I was sort of inserting myself on top of it—inserting my own rhythm and my own mode of presentation.

Let’s talk about your show, Becoming Imperceptible, which was presented at the Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans this year, and has now traveled to the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver.

I wonder what people will make of it when they see the exhibition because the work is very slow moving. It’s open but also hermetic and a lot of the decisions and steps I make are very slow and deliberate. And not necessarily in a way that I think would be readily apparent to anyone else. So I am curious.

The show is curated by Andrea Anderson. What conversations were you having with her?

Andrea has a Ph.D. in comparative literature, and she has a background in contemporary poetry. So that’s actually where the conversation started. Then we moved to how I think about ideas of representation, of politics and abstraction—how these two things relate—which is how my body of work has evolved: from language, to language and image, to more abstracted or abstract space. So in the exhibition, we really thought about the operation of each floor.

It’s a substantial exhibition—you cover three floors.

Yes. We thought critically about the operation of each floor. The first floor is visually similar to the installation I conceived for the Belgian Pavilion in 2015. It is maximalist, a kind of system of displaying a complete overview of the work. There’s a distinct visual rhythm. It’s a collage in space.

What happens on the next floor?

On the second floor things begin to empty out, and you begin to see that very much in the work itself. I use one piece to create another piece to create the second piece. It becomes a part as a whole or a whole as a part. But again this idea of how to represent something comes up, modes and mechanisms of representation. What is a fragment? So you have a portrait of Satomi Matsuzaki, the lead singer of Deerhoof, who I filmed for a 2009 three-channel video called Band. She is taken out of the space of that original, which documents Deerhoof in a space of that original, which documents Deerhoof in a raw, corridor-like space along one wall. In the end, they look like abstract columns that distort the viewer’s image of her or himself. The show encompasses various historical references, from the Bauhaus to Malcolm X to the Black Panthers to Godard. The objects carry these histories and ask them to coexist in a way—to ask, what is their potential?

How do you make the works? I have read a lot about the role of photocopying in your practice.

A lot of the things I do are very matter of fact. Let’s say for the Black Dada paintings, I use an image of LeWitt’s incomplete open cubes: Xeroxing it, cropping the Xerox, scanning it, enlarging it, and then laying this text over top of it. I take an object and do something to it, and then do something else to it. I would say everything is some sort of collage and has always been. This is true even in the earlier works that didn’t necessarily look like a collage, because what I was doing was taking someone else’s language and then I was sort of inserting myself on top of it—inserting my own rhythm and my own mode of presentation.

What is appropriation for you? What is that doing within the work?

To borrow or steal? It’s a complicated question.

I think that’s why I’m very slow, because I have to create the space where a kind of transition can occur—where it can go from being an image of an incomplete open cube to a mark or a line. That’s a conversation that you have with the material, slowly, over time. Now, because I’ve been using these images, these materials for so long, I no longer even think of my use as an act of appropriation. I think about it in a more discursive sense of just being in conversation with, or rubbing up against, something. I said once that we are appropriated as human beings, that’s what we are. I mean, how can anything be anything other than appropriation—which is why the term is so loaded and also so over-determined.
The Parallax View

TOM McDONOUGH ON THE ART OF ADAM PENDLETON

...the continuous present of and or of either or experience of e.g. history
—Joan Retallack, Memoir (2004)

If [history] were the past, it would not matter... History is the present.
—James Baldwin, A Rap on Race (1971)

WE USED TO THINK OF HISTORY as the realm of the settled, as an inalterable past, as a nightmare. That was the legacy bequeathed us by the past century's catastrophes, and we are still inclined to adopt its melancholic responses—to gaze back, like Walter Benjamin's angel of history, on the ruins as they have piled up, as on the inexorable logic of some tragedy. But while we can never redeem what has been lost, versions of the past are forever being reconstructed in our fabrication of the present. The current fascination with conjectural histories and what-if scenarios bespeaks a profound desire to imagine not only other pasts but other potential presents, too.
Perhaps we can consider this fascination to be a simultaneously poetic and political reaction to the continual deferral of a more equitable and humane society, something like the emancipatory verso to conspiracy theories, which are, with all their attendant resentment, the other great historical obsession of our time. In contrast to the conviction that unfathomable cabals have eradicated individual agency, conjunctural history preserves a space for subjective action and uncertainty. It allows us, however naively, to perceive the future as still open. Historical novels and their filmic progeny regularly traffic in our fascination with just these sorts of imagined situations, but so does a significant strain of contemporary art, among figures as diverse as Mario García Torres, Liam Gillick, Olivia Pender, and Tris Vonna-Michell. It is Adam Pendleton, however, who may take this strategy the furthest. Over the past half decade he has been making paintings, language-based performances, essays, and videos in which what-if scenarios mix together questions of race, queerness, art history, and politics so as to push the logic of alternative histories to a radical conclusion: a broad revisioning of our political and social realities.

In Pendleton's first exhibited works, from 2004 and 2005—consisting of text on murals, drawings, and canvases—he began to explore the possibilities of remixing poetic forms. Excerptsing short phrases from writers such as James Baldwin, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, and Toni Morrison, Pendleton reproduced their words in lowercase Arial type on flat planes of brilliant color; the texts were irregularly spaced, as if to denote the idiosyncratic rhythms of speech. (And even at this early stage, a performative element was present, with the artist sometimes including an audio recording in which he recited these bits of prose and poetry in stream-of-consciousness fashion.) The debt to Glenn Ligon's or Charles Gaines's text-based paintings was clear, but the orderliness of his lettering and frequent use of silk screen gave the paintings a paradoxical coolness that brought them closer to conceptual precedent and belied their highly lyrical content. For Pendleton routinely steered the fragments of his source texts—"I'll make you my own dairy queen, say, or two people together is a miracle—toward questions of race and queerness that they may or may not have been engaging in their original incarnations.

These first works establish an idiosyncratic practice of appropriation and an embrace of the peculiar illogic of poetry that would continue to inform his diverse output, even as its range of reference shifted dramatically from the private, or subjective, realm to that of public history, and from a purely text-based model to one that also incorporated a wide range of visual citations drawn from art history and photojournalism. Take his ongoing series of "Black Dada" paintings, 2008—, for example. To make these large canvases, Pendleton photocopies reproductions of Sol LeWitt's Incomplete Open Cubes, begun in 1974, enlarging details and cropping the works to produce dynamic graphic compositions that he then silk-screens on a black ground along with capital letters drawn from the words BLACK DADA—itself a cropped quotation from Leroi Jones's great 1964 poem "BLACK DADA NIHILISMUS." He conjoints the two as if to ask: What if Jones, then soon to become the black nationalist poet Amiri Baraka, had also written "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art?" This scenario seems absurd. The abstract systematizations of LeWitt's white lattices appear diametrically opposed to Jones's politically-poetic activism. And in many senses they are, but the manic proliferation at the heart of LeWitt's practice, the obsessive attempt to spell out all combinations of sides of cubes—which Rosalind Krauss described as a kind of "babble" as pointless as the actions of Samuel Beckett's Molloy—opens up some ground for the juxtaposition. Seen in this light, both Jones and LeWitt shared an impulse to wreck meaning by making use of the very structures that would seem to guarantee it, structures that—like grammar itself—are inevitably both aesthetic and political. This is not to say that the two can simply be reconciled, but they can be set against each other, and the historical chimera thus produced can encourage us to rethink histories that we more typically keep well apart. To put it simply, the artist is creating a genealogy—however conflicted—for his own work, troubling our near lineages with the crossbreeding of a Black Dada.

Pendleton is not interested in the logic of synthesis or recuperation, and Black Dada does not present us with some dialectical supersession of contradictory cultural forces. One might be tempted to understand it as an art of sampling, with Pendleton selecting images and poetic texts and inserting them into new contexts, borrowing from a set of operations developed by artists in the late 1990s to remix the fragmentary narratives characteristic of our present. But the idea of sampling somehow misses the particular quality of his appropriations: It implies a kind of postmodern leveling, a Deleuzian deterritorialization, that is at odds with the way Pendleton brings together objects—whether images, discourses, or texts—in a space where the friction of their confron fatally, their uneasy fit, remains always evident, always provisional. History, for this artist, is an uneven, recalcitrant terrain. As he explained in 2008: "I want to juxtapose peoples, moments, events, and even forms with historical periods where their influence/presence is often not considered and at times [un] acknowledged." He then quoted the poet Susan Howe, saying that "history is the record of winners."
That might sound like a truism, but it has a corollary in Pendleton’s interest in exploring what happens when that record, the “dominant” narrative of the past, becomes mixed up with other, “minor” ones. Mingle them challenges the very idea of any version of history prevailing; in the hybridity of Black Dada we find the possibility of creating new pasts, new histories—and thus new presents and futures.

In a manifesto composed around the time he started these works, Pendleton wrote, in an echo of the epigraph I quoted from Baldwin: “Black Dada is a way to talk about the world while talking about the past. It is our present moment.” Pendleton’s hybrid production exists through and within such conflations of different times and contexts. In fact, the richest space in his work is consistently the gap between two elements, where things come together and come apart, where distinctions between approaches or practices can be made and unmade. This critical encounter with history is performed not as a mnemonic device—the “memory” of memory within an amnesiac spectacle culture—but as a way of setting in motion “a future dynamic where new historical narratives and meanings can exist,” as the artist has put it. Pendleton’s art aims to create the arena in which that dynamic takes shape, but it does not seek to resolve it; he isn’t trying to provide us with those new stories cut from whole cloth. The very incompleteness of LeWitt’s cubes, as they appear on the surface of Pendleton’s “Black Dada” canvases, allows them to function allegorically as an image of a basic grammar from which the viewer might build new units of sense. The isolated letters derived from Jones’s poem work similarly, becoming something like concrete poetry. Hence the kinship of his work with experimental writing like that of Howe or Joan Retallack, both frequent references of his, which in its refusal of narrative works to break down the document that (in Howe’s words) is always “written by the Masters” and to hand back the work of meaning making to the reader. History, like language, is neither fatality nor prison house but a material to be manipulated and composed in the continuous construction of the present.

PRIOR TO THE “BLACK DADA” PAINTINGS, in 2005, Pendleton made a group of sixty-four works consisting of photographic reproductions silk-screened onto paper with cryptic words or phrases laid over them. The color scheme comprised stark shades of red, yellow, gray, and white, and for the first time in his art, images appeared, depicting scenes such as police attacking student protesters in Mexico City in 1968, or a KKK march. Some of the texts refer to his short-lived, quasi-fictitious band Big Daddy P. and the Relics, which only ever made one public appearance (with Pendleton as the sole performer), at a small Catholic college in suburban New York in the fall of 2005. The name of the group seems to evince simultaneously the world of rap (Big Daddy Kane et al.) and Benjamin’s conception of history as trash heap. But this series, suggestively titled “History,” has another significant reference, too: Andy Warhol’s early-1960s “Death and Disaster” silk screens, those images of car crashes and race riots, of funerals for assassinated presidents and of suicided movie stars, that constitute one of the closest approaches to the genre of history painting in our time. The reference would become more explicit in LAB Painting (Two Rows Splits Together white), 2006, whose broken bodies clearly evoke the precedent of Warhol’s Ambulance Disaster, ca. 1963—which perhaps not coincidentally was on view for most of 2005 at Dia:Beacon in upstate New York.

“Wiederholen is not Reproduzieren,” Lacan reminds us: Repetition is not reproduction. Hal Foster has used this statement to pry the logic of Warhol’s “Death and Disaster” works away from the unresolvable dichotomy of mechanical reproduction/simulacra/simulation versus engagement/empathy critique, and toward the psychoanalytic register of what he calls a traumatic realism. Following Lacan, the traumatic is to be understood as a missed encounter with the real, hence the latter’s unrepresentability; the real can only be repeated—in fact, such repetition is unavoidable. Foster argues that “repetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic.” In other words, far from simply emptying out the sign, the frequently abstract quality of Pendleton’s “History” works signals its proximity to the logic of traumatic realism, or even to something more like a metatrauma: a repetition of repetition. For these amalgamations were actually derived from photocopies of books by artists Pedro Reyes (Salmos [2002]) and Stephen Lathisophen (Hotel Terminus [2003]). What interested Pendleton in those artist’s books was precisely the way they were already, as he describes it, “packed with divergent material, cropped and blown up, a kind of atomization of information”—which might characterize his own aesthetic strategy from this moment as well. As the art historian David Drogin writes of Pendleton’s work, this act of appropriation, “with history dismantled into personalized arrangements, renew[s] the instability of discourse and identity.”

In this sense, Pendleton is certainly the inheritor of the critique of representation and of the centered subject, and he works within a recent lineage of artists for whom race is a historical, cultural, and political construct given shape through articulations of
difference. Yet he nudges this familiar position in an unexpected direction, toward the figuring of a fundamentally unstable identity made up of fragments of different histories. That is, Pendleton doesn’t take up images and texts from the world around him so much as those discourses seize him, communicate through him. He suggests as much in an interview: “I feel as though our consciousness is the result of appropriation. We are culture. The result of that which has become networked throughout our history into the web of our culture.” 10 The result is a body of work in which, rather than disappearing, race becomes a term that continually circulates to trouble all the others.

The “History” series anticipates the artist’s breakthrough works of the following year, which pushed yet further this operation of overlaying appropriated image and text and emerged from the context of LAB, an experimental “think tank” and magazine founded by the artist in 2006. This currently dormant platform offered the artist a means of opening up his practice to the ideas of others. The tabloid-format magazine—itself coedited by curator and critic Bartholomew Ryan, and laid out by David Reinfurt and Sarah Geprhart of the graphic-design firm ORG—hosted a wide range of participants, including architects, writers, designers, and artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn and Kelley Walker. LAB represents the moment that graphic design truly began to shape Pendleton’s work, allowing for a kind of paraoptic equivalence of text and image. Moreover, it permitted a shift to something resembling the multiplication of authorship and influence via appropriation and quotation of the widest-ranging sources, whether textual or photographic, which would drive his subsequent production.

That LAB provided a structure through which the vast archive of the twentieth century could be reshuffled and imagined anew is evident also in the paintings of this time, many of whose titles include the phrase “LAB Painting.” Here, the coded autobiographical allusions of his early monochrome-text works have dropped away entirely and are replaced with a new, expansive grasp of cultural history. “One of the things I have had to do,” Pendleton notes, “and maybe one of the reasons I have learned to put my practice in other people’s hands, or created operating platforms like LAB or Black Dada or even been attracted to things like language poetry and design culture, is a kind of distancing that removes the biographical and the located body from the equation.”11 His refusal to prioritize between, say, considerations of racial identity and those of artistic production has at times made his work seem reticent in the extreme—hence the slightly embarrassed tone of some commentators, one of whom has written that Pendleton operates “most conceptually and elliptically.”12
IT IS BEYOND DOUBT that Pendleton shares in a postmodern lineage of intertextuality, one that stretches from Situationist détournement through the allegorical procedures of the Pictures generation. But race—and sexuality—inflicts that lineage in very particular ways, making his conjectural histories both contemporary and distinct. This can be discerned perhaps most clearly in his performances, which frequently combine music and spoken text in a cut-up montage not unlike the proliferating imagery of his paintings. The launch of LAB was accompanied by a lecture-performance titled about the language I use I’ll use, 2006, in which Canadian folk-rock musician Kate Fenner sang material drawn from Woody Guthrie and Phil Ochs. The working procedure initiated with LAB continues through the recent “System of Display” series, 2008+: These works are like modestly sized shadow boxes that frame glass and mirrors on which photographs and text have been silk-screened. The images draw together references to twentieth-century Western art—Zurich Dada, installation shots of the first Documenta, New York experimental dance—and to postcolonial African cultural and political history, with photographs of celebrations of Congolese independence, and Nigerian portrait photographs, as in System of Display, ODAS (Foundations/International Photo Studio, Couple, Calabar, Nigeria, 1953), 2008–2009. The archival-sounding titles hint at the impact recent curatorial practices exploring the visual culture of decolonization and the postcolonial world have had on Pendleton. As in the “Black Dada” paintings, however, that transparency is paired with cryptic concrete poetry.

As much as Pendleton’s work is premised on a strategy of fragmentation and disjunction, whereby the oblique relation of text and image confronts the viewer with pieces of an unfixed grammar of identity and artistic form, it nevertheless refuses that belief in the utter fungibility of images characteristic of other modes of contemporary Warholian appropriation. Pendleton’s return to Warhol might usefully be compared with that of artists like Kelley Walker, whose references to his Pop antecedent are explicit in collage-poster digital pieces such as schema; Aquafresh plus Crest with tartar control, 2003, which reworks and adds toothpaste smears to a detail of one of the infamous Charles Moore photographs from Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963 that Warhol himself had used in that year’s silk screen Mustard Race Riot. Walker has sometimes been described as supplanting the latter’s traumatic repetition with pure simulacral reproduction—“just images’ to be used without regard to their historical and political specificity,” in Glenn Ligon’s characterization of this line of criticism. Yet as Ligon argues, Walker’s work in fact forces us to reconsider the impossibility of these images’ degrada-

dation into pure simulacrum. “Walker is quite aware of
Pendleton's conjectural histories are not simply utopian fables of what might have been.

the intractability of the 'problem' of his racial identity in relationship to images of black people, and part of the impact of his work is that it calls attention to the very difficult and still unsettled questions about the politics of representation." His subject matter, in other words, cannot simply be incorporated into a frictionless and appropriable realm of culture, because the psychic logic of race continues to trouble the production and consumption of images. Pendleton's work can't escape this dynamic either. But in distinction to both Walker and Warhol, he not only points to the traumatic real of race—in however deferred or distanced a manner—but also imbues his source images and texts with new valences, finding possible and even fantastic futures in the way that various discourses and contexts interact with one another and interfere with our assumptions about their meaning.

In describing his working method, Pendleton has said, "When I write, I basically construct a labyrinth for myself through which I must move as the writer. The works, images, references, and ideas of 'culture' ... are the materials that line the path of my personally composed labyrinth. When I am composing something, it's an attempt to galvanize a kind of temporary canon." Yet what seems crucial here is precisely the degree to which the contexts from which his materials are drawn remain incompatible, obdurately refusing to be pulled into a new organic whole. His conjectural histories are not simply utopian fables of what might have been: They also expose the incommensurability of subaltern histories, the very difficulty of thinking Language poetry and the Rainbow Coalition and AIDS activism and the church at one and the same time, as Pendleton did for his acclaimed contribution to Perforama 07, *The Revival*. This work combined texts by experimental poets such as John Ashbery, Charles Bernstein, and Leslie Scalapino with political speeches by Jesse Jackson and Larry Kramer, which were all collaged into a gospel-style "revival" service. This sort of sampling aims not to produce a closed work but rather to disperse the artist—and the audience—across a wide semantic field. Pendleton is not intent, as I have said, on resolution, but on ambiguity and contradiction. This hybridity is of course a cultural condition we all share today; his performances, like his paintings, channel and remix it, allowing us to perceive the sharp edges where discourses collide.
Incommensurability lies at the heart of Pendleton’s first projected-image work, BAND, 2009, a three-channel video installation that was also performed live this past September in San Francisco. For its original version, Pendleton filmed the indie-rock band Deerhoof as they recorded “I Did Crimes for You”—a song whose lyrics are based on Jean-Luc Godard’s Sympathy for the Devil, his 1968 ode to the Rolling Stones and absurdist political theater. Footage of Deerhoof is intercut with audio from another film, this one a short government documentary made in the early ’70s about “Teddy,” a seventeen-year-old African American from Los Angeles, who is rethinking his engagement with the Black Panthers. Little in these combinations adds up: Pendleton’s ambiguity is far from Godard’s Maoist certainties; the massive cultural resonance of the Rolling Stones cannot be duplicated by the niche appeal of Deerhoof; the band’s detached hipster take on its lyrics stands at the opposite pole from the earnest speech of Teddy. The list could go on. Rather than a model to imitate, Pendleton uses Godard’s film as a framework, a set of formal operations and ideological concerns that allows him to construct a new work that again visits the complicated juncture of race, politics, and cultural production. After all, the original juxtaposed a white British rock ‘n’ roll band that had taken its best riffs from black American musicians with black British militants playing in sketches written by a white French director. But Pendleton is less concerned with the contradictions of the past than with insisting on its continuity with our present: The beautiful grain of Teddy’s voice, movingly reflecting on his desire for a different future, rubs against the pristine digital video of Deerhoof in the studio.

In its palimpsestic accumulation of artistic modes and temporalities, Pendleton’s art of repetition and appropriation unexpectedly discovers an emancipatory potential in the conditions of early-twenty-first-century life. The poet Jeni Osman described something of that latency when she wrote that Pendleton’s works “lovingly degrade the past in order to create a new lineage that can move into the future.” But the past is not simply degraded: In the space of the canvas or the arena of performance, Pendleton juxtaposes incompatible forms, times, materials, contexts, and modes of identity in order to refashion history into something that opens out into the new. In the act of assembling these heterogeneous elements, Pendleton suggests that our “appropriation” by history is not mere fatalism—and in that moment yet another possible future comes into view. □

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