Adam Pendleton with Allie Biswas

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 Imponderable, 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.

RAIL: How 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—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 those 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.

PENDLETON: You mentioned that 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 politics? I was about creating a capacious space, breaking down one form and creating something else.

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, Rob Jordan, and Lorde. They basically attempted to represent the essence 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 Reitacker, Ron Silliman, Leslie Scalapino, and Charles Bernstein.

PENDLETON: Nothing changes. [Asks Jordan if there is a good time to talk about Black Dada, which could be read as connecting language to a political drive.]
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PENDLETON: What impact did those writers have on you?
PENDLETON: 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 the theological or philosophical or political underpinnings behind language, going from one school of thought—I guess you could call it a byzantine school, which the poets I was reading had a very political foundation with regards to context—and I think that was more aligned with how conceptual art is thought about when it comes to language and 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 to take sides, I wasn't a poet at all, and think that 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,
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.

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 I presented, I often say it’s a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It surfaced in a conversational space, where I was just talking to friends. I had Amir Baraka’s book, The Dead Lecturer, which contains the poem “Black Dada.setState,” I found the language striking: “Black Dada,” just the. “Black” and the “Dada” (“Black”) as a kind of re-energized 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 to do? Black Dada also became a way to create a conversation and to insert my work into conversations about appropriation that I was observing at that particular time, in about 2008. I don’t know if you remember this, but there was a lot of talk 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 at it and trying to change the shape of it, and of the space(s) it represents.

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 Solitude Carmichael — and then it shifts into “Language,” which includes a range of writers whose work I’ve been drawn to, such as Harriet Mullen, Ratliff, and various. And then “The third section is ‘Artists’ Postulates,’ which collects texts by or about artists whom I relate to Black Dada, including Ad Reinhardt, Juan Jonas, and Sum Douglas, who is represented by his screenplay for Inconceivable Memories. It’s going to come out next year for a show I’m doing in Berlin. The original version was spread beyond, 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, Luisa Lapitan, Tom McDonough, and Jonas Thompson.

I’m currently writing 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 cannon. For example, with the Black Dada paintings — which relate formally to minimal 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 both a contradiction, this duality, a lot, a little bit at the same time. So, again, may be those paintings were made in 1974. It’s logical. What did LeWitt say? Logical judgments lead to non-experiments.

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.”

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 space, I like to be around my books, my things. I can’t really pack up the studio and go to Beirut. 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 dbb and flow of how this very large entity functions. I began a conversation with Joan Ratliff — who is an essayist and poet, and who used to teach at Bard College — saying, “What if I did something in 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 Hulse titled The Foun- ders of Love, and so I was initially going to do something around that text, whether that be a public conversation with Hulse, or something else. In the text, and the response to that text, there is this realization 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 her idea of love and eros, and to Plato, to the Symposium. She conceived this event called the Symposium and the basic premise was that she invited different people — myself, along with poet Anna Carson, Sandi Hilal (of Decolonizing Architecture, Film and Theory), Peter Krikelas and Luciana Jeronim de Souza, and poet Fred Moten — to give talks that began with the word “suppose.” So “Suppose…” was this conceptual conceit, or the point of departure suppose.

How was the event executed?

Pendleton: We delivered the talks in MoMA’s Founder 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 collected and redistributed, and we created a kind of greatest hits from those fragments. As I was going through these phrases I realized that in a strange way the Symposium did somehow articulate what I 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 an aspect of The Revival: call and response and community through difference, something that has often been a key to black music as well.

During Symposium 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 Symposium, because that was shortly after George Zimmerman was found not guilty for murdering Trayvon Martin. At that time, in early 2013, the conversation was, “What language stands its ground?” “Stand Your Ground” was the law that created the legal gray area where Zimmerman got off. He was “standing my ground.” I thought we need language that stands its ground.

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

Pendleton: I couldn’t help but respond to the absurdity of the situation. It was the absurdity of all the crap that made the ongoing task I set for myself instead of just flipping off Black Dada. 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 language. They are both very dear short statements.

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 also 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 “Ella’s 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 so timely, there was no individual voice that rose above all voices. During the protests against the Zimmerman verdict, I was looking for a voice. There were different recitations, but you could feel that no one really knew how to respond, which fascinated me from many different reasons. Was that an evolution? Something new and important? Or was it something that was received as a shock? It was almost as though, after that, I was asking, “Does Black Lives Matter function? Does this language function? What can it do, what does it do?” and I brought those questions along with others into the visual and conceptual space of my work.

Pendleton: Black Dada shorthand for “This is Adam?”
Biswa: It’s a kind of rash...

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

Biswa: In 2008 I was invited by curator Krist Grilz 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 one of the lines of his exhibitions is “it’s a matter of fact, and it then collects. So it goes from one, two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two, sixty-four, etcetera, accumulating a repeating series of sentences that are also attracting new language to them as it evolves. In effect it’s the theoretical underpinning of the Black Dada project, it deliberately aligns aesthetic/political directions, creating a methodology that I think is 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 have this idea of Holder as my doppleganger or something you know, going around as the ambassador of Black Dada. It’s just simple—I think the “Black” and the “Dada,” but you’re right, there is nothing straightforward about it.

Pendleton: By taking the hashtag Black Lives Matter and inserting it into the text, 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? To do your text 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 and act upon it, given the expression’s widespread usage, obviously through social media in particular, it popularity could perhaps even be viewed as “fashionable.” That sounds inappropriate, but I think you’re understanding what I’m getting at.

Biswa: You’re the second person to use the word “fashionable,” the thing is that there are stakes involved in everyday things that we do. This is paraphrasing the words of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, my intention as an artist is not to use the modes and methods of protect in the sense of saying, “this is wrong” and “this is right,” it is, however, to draw attention to things at times, in different ways through different registers. So I wanted to bring it into the space of actual fashion, where things are short, and I call it “Black Wall Street,” in an art space, it’s 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 mainstream and everyone’s talking about it. In 2013 it came about and now, in the mainstream media, it’s like, “Oh, you know the police killings and so forth.” This again, this language has not and will not leave the space of our work. It was about bringing a different kind of rhetoric and attention to the language, to the moment, to the movement.

Pendleton: It was about extending the temporary space that it exists in, and creating a legacy.

Biswa: Let’s bring Black Lives Matter into the temporality that art objects and discourse can afford. I showed these paintings in a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver in 2015 and the local art critic called it “provocative” and said, “Oh yes, these are nice paintings, but this is today. Six months ago maybe this would have meant something, but it just seems so old.” There is the case in point—this is so old—when actually there are things that as a country we have been grappling with for hundreds of years. It is neither new nor old.

Pendleton: For those who appreciate the importance of not forgetting about this moment in history, you have made sure that it doesn’t get forgotten about.

Biswa: The first floor which begins 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 another piece. It becomes a part as a whole or a whole as a part. But again this is about how to represent something comes up, modes and mechanisms of representation. What is a fragment? So you have a portrait of Vincent Mataliaz, the lead singer of Debossed, who I filmed for a 2009 three-channel video called Hand. She takes out of the space of that original, which documents Debossed in a recording studio working on a new song, and it now exists as a six-second loop where all you see is his head. It’s just on repeat, an index of a larger work. Then the same thing happens with Ibrahim’s poem “Black Dada Nighttime.” I represent it through a wall painting that lists almost all of the proper nouns in his text in the order that they appear. It’s a kind of visual note taking. Then you have the “System of Display” works, also on the first floor, which began by using many images, but now use very few images and again look at the question of what bears the burden of representation. Is it the language or the image? How do they function together? There are also ceramic floor pieces that I made via the influence of “clairvoyant poet” Hannah Weiner. Then, as you move up to the third floor, this idea of portraiture that began with the loop of Saturn carries over, but this time it’s a video portrait of David Hilliard, who was Chief of Staff for the Black Panther Party. This portrait is related to another 3D of Lorraine O’Grady and both are partially influenced by Gertrude Stein’s textual self-portraits.

Pendleton: What are the final works that the viewer encounters?

Biswa: The large, five-foot by ten-foot collages on mirror-polished stainless steel that are based on a photograph of water taken by Josef Albers. They hang in a raw, Corridor-like space along one wall. In the end, they look like abstract columns that distort the viewer’s image of self or other. The show encompasses various historical references, from the hallucinations to male violence to the Black Panthers to Godard. The objects carry these histories and ask them to resist in a way—to ask, what is their potential?

Pendleton: How do you make the works? I have read about the role ofphoto-copying in your practice.

Biswa: 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 LOW W’s incomplete open cube: Xeroxing it, shooting 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, and 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 sensibility on top of it—inserting my own rhythm and my own mode of presentation.

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

Biswa: To borrow or steal? It’s a complicated question. I think that’s why I’m so clear, because I have to create the space where a kind of transition can occur—when it can go from being an image of an incomplete open cube to a mark or a line. That is 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 discomposing 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.