

The Highlights - Interview with Adam Pendleton

GILLIAN SNEED: As a painter, performer, and writer, your artistic practice is obviously cross-disciplinary. You mentioned in another conversation we had the frustration you sometimes feel when people in the art world get a brain cramp when they can't easily categorize you: "Are you a painter, a performance artist, or a writer?" they ask. To me, the silkscreen paintings and the performances seem so naturally linked, especially through their use of text. I was wondering if you could speak to the relationships among your various bodies of work, and especially your approach to textual material.



Adam Pendleton, *Black Dada (LK/DDA)*, 2008, silkscreen on canvas diptych, each panel 47

¾" x 74", 95 ½" x 74" overall. Courtesy of the Artist.

ADAM PENDLETON: I think the distinctions between disciplines are unfortunate and often wholly artificial. That said, my first professional interactions within an art context were as a painter, so in a way, I began as a painter. Yet, I've always thought of a painting as a space for performance and textual interventions/realities.

For me, it's much more about the idea than the medium. An idea is typically developed and is often materialized by working with and through different mediums. Operating from that position I've always thought of language as an image-making device and image as a language-making device. The separation between text and image is such a dominant, dogmatic, and problematic position. The actuality of experience is much too complex for a binary approach. So I work hard to make sure things are, and remain, fluid; that both (text and image) are on the same plane if not literally, then at the least theoretically. One defines the other. One can redefine the other so the work is a perpetual space of/for feedback and conflation.



Adam Pendleton, *Rendered in Black*, 2007, Installation of 65 unique glazed 10-inch ceramic black cubes, 41"×228"×135". Courtesy of the Artist.

GS: In 2005, you founded LAB MAG, an experimental magazine available in PDF format that functions as a kind of lab for the collaborative projects of architects, writers, graphic designers, and artists. Could you talk a little about the impetus for the establishment of this

magazine and the role it plays in your overall practice?

AP: LAB MAG (co-edited by Bartholomew Ryan and designed by David Reinfurt of O R G and Sarah Gephardt) is a kind of community-building device-of people, but more importantly of ideas. I am always interested in seeing what happens when disparate ideas from a wide array of cultural producers are networked. It's a way of rebroadcasting and repackaging existing and new information. All the contributors were asked to respond to a text I wrote that appears at the beginning of the magazine. Of course they could have ignored it. Contributors were asked to either contribute a one-page ad project or a larger, ten-page project.

By perpetually re-presenting and, in the case of LAB MAG, presenting the work of others as a kind of work of my own I am constantly putting my practice in other people's hands, and also implying a continuity between past, present, and future dynamics. Ideas are fluid and shared. My process is a "recyclopedica" of sorts. I view LAB MAG as much as a work of art as I do one of the paintings or a text, and I am interested in how they might be read in relationship to each other.



Adam Pendleton, *LAB MAG*.

Courtesy of the Artist.

GS: Like LAB MAG, much of your work comes out of the text-based tradition of Conceptual art and employs the strategies of appropriation stemming from the Pop aesthetic.

What artists do you look to as influential to your practice, and how are their work and yours relevant to contemporary art discourse?

AP: The writer Leslie Scalapino wrote an experimental autobiography, which successfully turns the genre on its head. Everyone is always asked what influences them. Perhaps influence works the other way around, and we are influencing the past more than it's influencing us. Most autobiographies deal with that question of influence. Scalapino has a paragraph in her autobiography where she simply makes long lists of people (many of them other writers, artists, et cetera). I've come to assume it is her (successful) way of answering the question of influence. I'm inclined to make such a list, but fear, in this context, too much would be read into it.



Adam Pendleton, *History the Relics (White)*, 2005, silkscreen on canvas, 30"×22". Courtesy of the Artist.

GS: OK, fair enough. But what about how your own personal experiences or your background has influenced you? For instance, you grew up in Virginia. Coming from the South myself, I identify with that southern gospel quality to the oratory in your text performances. The performativity in the black church, in particular, is very powerful. I mean it's clear in works like *The Revival from Performa 07*, in which you actually collaborated

with a gospel choir. But it's also evident to me in works like *Black Dada*, which you performed this summer at Manifesta 7. Even though it was presented as a kind of manifesto, it was still reminiscent of a sermon, especially in your charismatic presentation style and use of repetition to build the text and create a rhythm. Did you go to church growing up? Does your upbringing play out in your work?

AP: Very little of my work has any kind of autobiographical subtext. I wrote an autobiographical performance poem during the summer of 2006 titled "So I Independent in Georgia in the 90's", which was a language-driven sketch of particular events in my life up to that point, but that's really the only piece concerned with biography. A lot of the work is purposefully deceptive, particularly the earlier paintings, in the way in which it presents language/images/events. For minority artists, I've always felt, our work tends to be marginalized through biographical interpretations of intention.

I've also never thought of my work as spoken word as much as centered around or concerned with multiple voices, which can be located in the various sources I pull from. In a lot of my work there is a tension between a rule-based and formal approach. The lines in the *Black Dada* manifesto presented at Manifesta 7 build according to rules I laid out for myself when I began to write the text, which ended up having formal results such as rhythm. When I perform I've come to think of myself as a character suspended somewhere between fact and fiction or a fact of fiction.



Adam Pendleton, *The Revival*, 2007, performed as a part of Performa 07.
Courtesy of the Artist.

GS: A part of that fact/fiction blurring is related to the fact that like your images, most of your texts are appropriated from various sources and recontextualized. Does appropriating language differ from appropriating images?

AP: More so than things being appropriated. I feel as though our consciousness is the result of appropriation. We are appropriated. We are/culture is the result of that which has become networked throughout our history into the web/realm of culture.



Adam Pendleton, *The Revival*, 2007, performed as a part of Performa 07.
Courtesy of the Artist.

GS: Do you think that this kind of appropriated "consciousness" that results from history and culture is avoidable, or that it should it be? Does your work aim to alter these structures, or

does it just try to raise awareness that these structures exist?

AP: It's not avoidable. It's a function of human perception. I aim to reveal the complexities of these structures. The simultaneous nature of being.

GS: Yes, "the simultaneous nature of being." I like that. As an audience member, that is a very good way to describe what it feels like to experience your simultaneous juxtaposition of multiple references.

How do you hope your approach of decontextualizing images and texts and reassembling them in new juxtapositions reflects on the thematic content you deal with? What kinds of new meanings are you aiming to achieve?

AP: Too often the presentation of ideas, images, et cetera, doesn't deal with the complexity of the real. I want to juxtapose peoples, moments, events, and even forms with historical periods where their influence/presence is often not considered and at times acknowledged.

The writer Susan Howe wrote, "History is the record of winners." By dealing with the residue of our past to confront and give shape to our past/present situation I hope to create work that creates space for a future dynamic where new historical narratives and meanings can exist.



Adam Pendleton's studio,
Courtesy of the Artist.

GS: This still seems a little vague... Could you be more specific about the kinds of narratives and meanings you are aiming for?

AP: A "history of everything" perhaps, that is simultaneous and complex. It's not enough to be nostalgic about the past. It's still here, and we've got a lot of work to do.