

# The Parallax View

TOM McDONOUGH ON THE ART OF ADAM PENDLETON

Below: Adam Pendleton, *History* (LAB 01 grey white), 2005, silk-screen ink on canvas, 30 x 22".

Right: Adam Pendleton, *LAB Painting (jelly red)*, 2006, silk-screen ink on canvas, 56 x 42".



... the continuous present of and or of either or experience of e.g. history

—Joan Retallack, *Memnoir* (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 unalterable 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.



Adam Pendleton, *System of Display, L (LIGHT/Godard, Made in U.S.A., 1966)*, 2010, silk-screen ink on glass and mirror, 48 7/8 x 48 7/8 x 3".



Above: Adam Pendleton, *Black Dada (LK/LC/AA)* (detail), 2008–2009, diptych, silk screen ink on canvas, each 48 x 75 1/4".

Below: Adam Pendleton, *That Man Was Singing*, 2005, silk-screen ink on canvas, 54 x 41".

that man was singing that man was  
 singing baby if you come withme  
 i'llmakeyou my own dairy queen or if that's  
 locked we'll find an all night jack  
 in the box steaksandwich fried onion  
 rings blackberry strawberry butterscotch  
 shake blackberry strawberry  
 butterscotch shake baby  
 if you come now baby if you  
 baby if you come now

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, conjectural 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 Garcia Torres, Liam Gillick, Olivia Plender, 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. Excerpting 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'LLMAKEYOU MY OWN DAIRY QUEEN, say, or TWO-PEOPLETOGETHERISAMIRACLE—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 conjoins 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 politico-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*<sup>1</sup>—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 chimeras thus produced can encourage us to rethink histories that we more typically keep well apart.<sup>2</sup> To put it simply, the artist is creating a genealogy—however conflicted—for his own work, troubling our neat 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 confrontation, 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."<sup>3</sup> He then quoted the poet Susan Howe, saying that "history is the record of winners."<sup>4</sup>

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. Mingling 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.

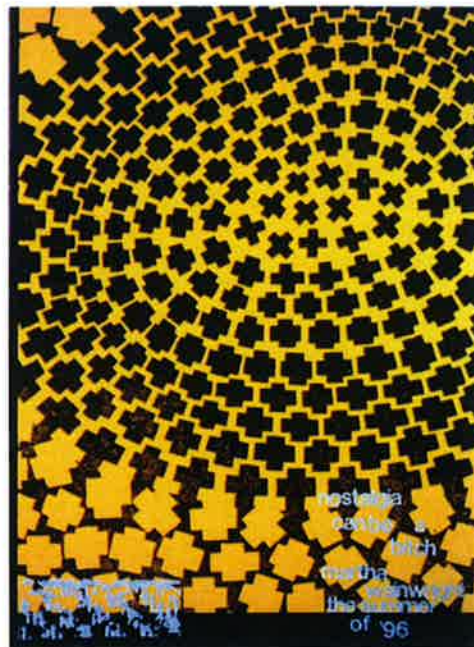
In a manifesto composed around the time he started these works, Pendleton wrote, in an echo of the epigraph I quoted from Baldwin: "Black Dada is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It is our present moment."<sup>5</sup> Pendleton's hybrid production exists through and within such confluences 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 reinscription 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 images 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-fictional 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 evoke 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 Split 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.<sup>6</sup> 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."<sup>7</sup> In other words, far from simply emptying out the sign, the frequently abstract quality of Pendleton's "History" works signals their 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 Laphisophon (*Hotel Terminus* [2005]). 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.<sup>8</sup> As the art historian David Drogin writes of Pendleton's work, this act of appropriation, "with history dismantled into personalized arrangements, renews the instability of discourse and identity."<sup>9</sup>

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



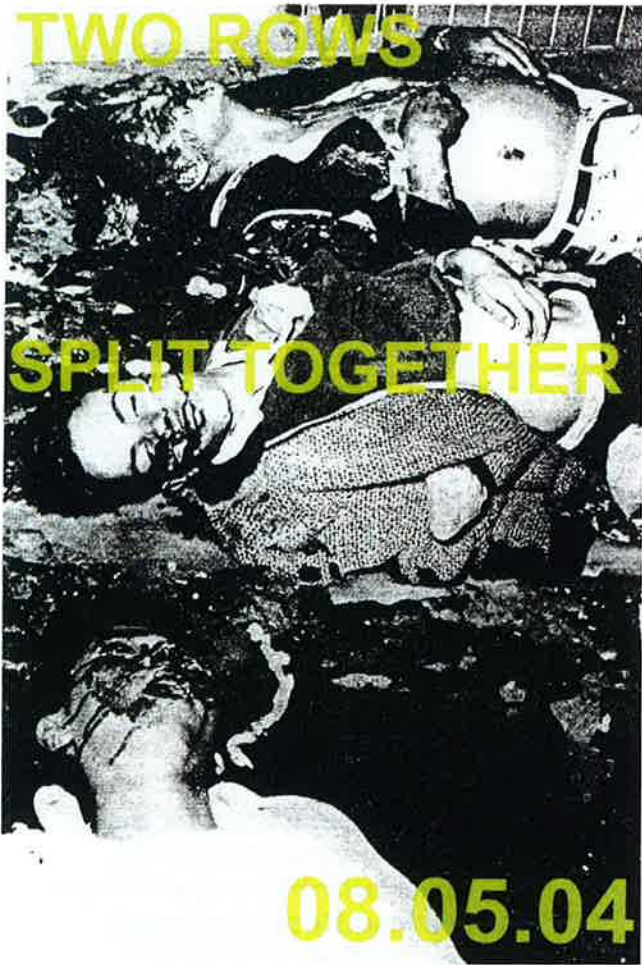
Above: Adam Pendleton, *History (Nostalgia yellow)*, 2005, silk-screen ink on canvas, 30 x 22".

Below: Adam Pendleton, *The Heliocentric Worlds of Big Daddy P.*, 2005, silk-screen ink on canvas, 45½ x 45½".

**For Pendleton, history is neither fatality nor prison house but a material to be manipulated and composed in the continuous construction of the present.**

### THE HELIOCENTRIC WORLDS OF BIG DADDY P.





Left: Adam Pendleton, *LAB Painting (Two Rows Split Together white)*, 2006, silk-screen ink on canvas, 72 1/4 x 48".

Right: Cover and pages from *LAB MAG 1*, 2006. Photos: Chris Kendall. Magazine edited by Adam Pendleton and Bartholomew Ryan, designed by David Reinfurt and Sarah Gephart.



Opposite page, from left: Adam Pendleton, *LAB Painting (LAB)*, 2006, silk-screen ink on canvas, 56 x 42". Adam Pendleton, *LAB Painting (Josef & Anni Albers abstract)*, 2006, silk-screen ink on canvas, 56 x 42".

**Rather than disappearing, race here becomes a term that continually circulates to trouble all the others.**

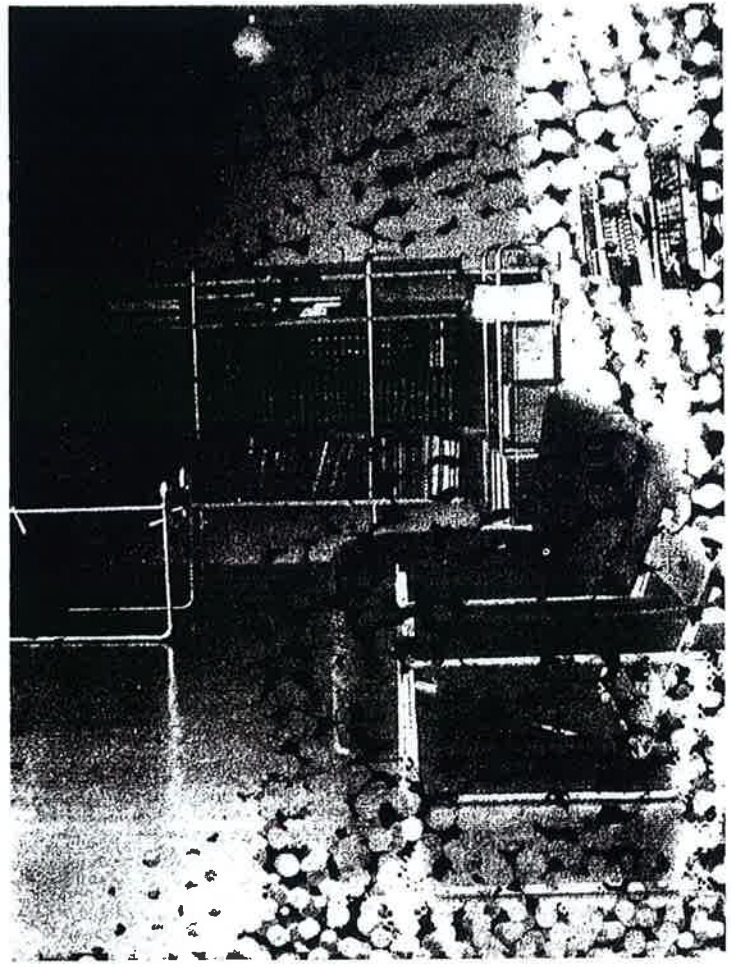
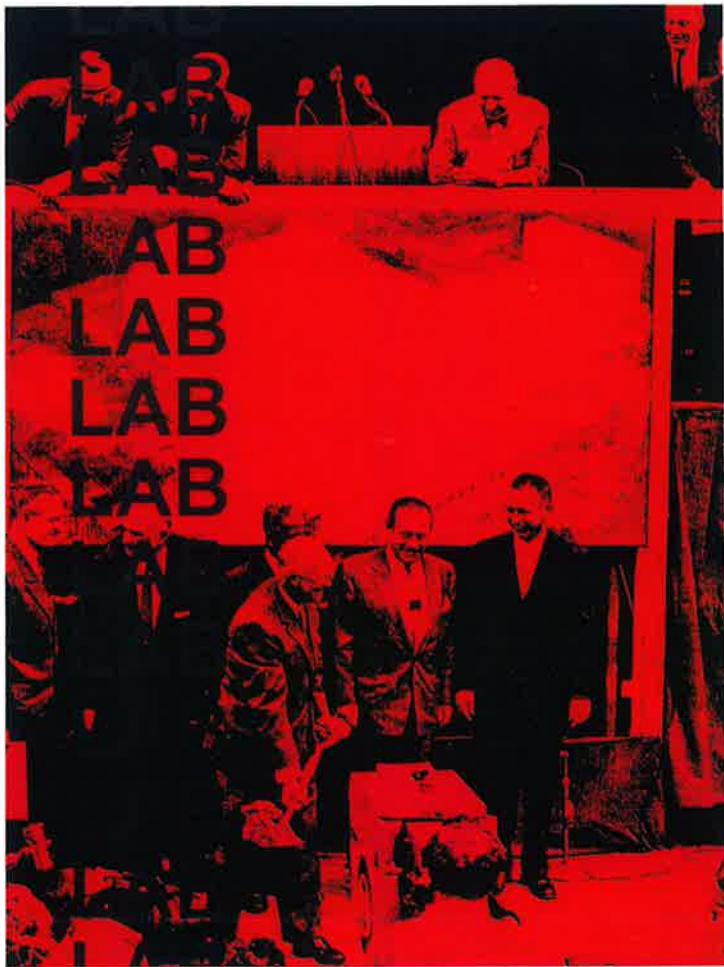
difference. Yet he nudges this familiar position in an unexpected direction, toward the figuring of a fundamentally unstable identity made up of fragments of different histories. That is, Pendleton doesn't take up images and texts from the world around him so much as those discourses seize him, communicate through him. He suggests as much in an interview: "I feel as though our consciousness is the result of appropriation. We are appropriated. We are/culture is the result of that which has become networked throughout our history into the web/realm of culture."<sup>10</sup> 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—itsself coedited by curator and critic Bartholomew Ryan, and laid out by David Reinfurt and Sarah Gephart of the graphic-design firm O R G—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 paratactic 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 reshuf-

fled 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."<sup>11</sup> 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."<sup>12</sup>



IT IS BEYOND DOUBT that Pendleton shares in a post-modern lineage of intertextuality, one that stretches from Situationist *détournement* through the allegorical procedures of the Pictures generation. But race—and sexuality—inflects 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 consider the *impossibility* of these images’ degradation 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."<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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 Performa 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.



Adam Pendleton, *System of Display, R (RIGHT/Swedish Interior, acceptera, 1931)*, 2010–11, silk-screen ink on glass and mirror, 63 1/4 x 48 1/2 x 3".